A WARTIME YOUTH

The World War II Memories of a Young German Soldier

By

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FOREWORD

This is a brief account - in 19 short chapters - of 6 years of war, World War II, and in greater detail, 2 1/2 years of military service.

This story is quite typical of countless similar stories of those times. What lends it some special accent perhaps is that we were young then, teenagers, for whom life was fresh and new and everything was the first time and little if anything was routine.

This little book is "my story" of those years; but, it is also the story of my comrades and compatriots, of whom in a wider sense there were many, many thousands, who as 15- and 16-year olds manned the anti-aircraft batteries around Germany's industrial cities during the intensive bombing in the last three years of World War II, and who later, as almost all German military personnel, ended up in the infantry.

The story is based on a write-up, in telegram style, made only weeks after my return from the war, plus various notes jotted down in the months and years to follow.

But why?

Why write another book, even only a booklet, about World War II, when the book stores are full of documentaries, diaries, histories and novels of World War II; when, while it lasted, we couldn't wait for the war to end; when human nature prefers, does it not, to leave hard things buried?

Why do veterans write their wartime memories?

The strongest reason probably is that for many of us this war was, in a strange but real way, the high-water mark experience of our lives. There are high-water mark experiences of other kinds, - marriage, immigration, career, children, travel, etc. But, different from these, during the war the nitty gritty of life stretched to the ultimate everything that was in us: endurance, resilience, courage, faith, discipline, love of our fellow man, and inner security, all against man's worst enemies, fear and selfishness.

Every life has at least one "high-water mark experience", and it need not be one of joy or pleasure; it may be a sea voyage, it may be travel to far away places, it may be the founding and building of an enterprise, or a scientific discovery, it may be a birth, it may be any of the varied dramas of human life.

For us it was, very simply, World War II.

Another reason for writing this is that some of us have an inner urge to express ourselves in some coherent way, to make order, to see on paper before

us, such an experience - rather than leave it all buried where the memories fester and trouble us, and where the tooth of time will gnaw them into oblivion.

And a third reason is that, just maybe, somebody might gain one valuable idea, one insight or perspective, or might somehow be encouraged, in like manner, to express his or her "high-water mark experience".

Speaking for myself, I have two added reasons.

As an immigrant, former enemy alien and then citizen of this country, which I love deeply, I have no framework, or facilities or fellowship to share, or perhaps just to ramble on with others, about similar experiences of those years. First, it would have been too difficult, and later, who was there to listen?

Lastly, my two sons, my daughter, my son-in-law, my daughter-in-law and various friends and colleagues over the years have nudged me, some even have urged me, to do what I am doing here, to "write it all down". My wife has heard me tell fragments, and it might interest her to read "the whole story".

So here it is.

I want to encourage others to write down, however haltingly or imperfectly, their major life experiences. It is healing and maturing. - I don't know whether I read it, heard it said, or made it up myself, but "there is a book in everybody". Everybody has experienced, is experiencing and will experience something, many things, of value or interest - not only to the reader, but also to the writer, to himself or herself.

And so I hope, dear reader, that you will take this story in the spirit of how it is meant, - to share, to stimulate and to summarize.

Note for the Reader's Convenience:

1 kilometer	=	0.6 mile
1 meter	=	3.3 feet
1 centimeter	=	0.4 inch

or

1 mile	=	1.6 kilometer
1 foot	=	1/3 meter
1 inch	=	2 1/2 centimeter

THE BEGINNING

It is late August 1939. I am 12 years old, and my Aunt (my foster parent) and I are spending several weeks on an island in the Baltic Sea, staying in a modest inn and spending much of the time at the beach. There is lots of sun, lots of sand and I build numbers and numbers of huge sand castles. There are kids around to play with, there is the surf, and my Aunt spends most of the time peacefully sitting in the beach basket doing cross word puzzles, reading, keeping an eye on me now and then, and letting her eyes go far to the horizon. It is a wonderful summer of peace.

And yet, I don't really understand, but every now and then, and recently much more than before, adults are excitedly talking with each other about something, looking worried. There are newspaper headlines about troubles on the Polish border, and one evening I even saw a group of adults vehemently debating about weapons and victory and warfare and all these things. I can't make out what is going on but I have a mixture of excitement and dread. War, what is war to a 12-year old? I had heard grim stories about World War I from my Aunt who was a nurse in a military hospital operating room from the first day to the last, helping treat wounded Germans, English, French, Russians, and I still remember she always says the Russians were the ones that complained the least.

Yes, it is a beautiful summer, but there is trouble. But what is it, how close, what will it mean?

And then one day, it is our second-to-last day, we stand at the tiny train station. The scene is so very different. There stand men in uniform complete with marching pack, rifle, helmet and gas mask. By their side stand wives, girlfriends, relatives, their arms tucked under the elbows of the men. The men are quiet, try to smile, don't say much. The women have red eyes, handkerchiefs come out frequently. The children look puzzled, the boys with occasional questions, the girls quiet and not saying much, and then the train comes. Suddenly there are hugs, kisses, embraces, longing looks, brave smiles. And as the train slowly chugs out of the little station, and whistles, my Aunt explains to me that it is Mobilization Day which means war is imminent and suddenly it doesn't feel like vacation anymore. It doesn't feel like sun and sand and enjoyment and peace anymore, it seems like something is coming that will change everything, everything, everything.

And then, that night, we sit quietly on the beach in the beach basket as the moon just rises way off in the distance over the horizon. It is a new moon only a few days old, and as it slowly rises over the horizon in red orange color I shiver. It looks like an ominous foreboding signal. It looks like the symbol of war rising upon the earth.

THE EARLY SIGNS

It is a few weeks later, fall 1939. Because our home town is close to the French border, as a precaution we have, temporarily, moved into the center of the country much farther away from the border.

It is a rainy Sunday. The night before was an air raid alarm, the very first time, in the small town where we are now staying in temporary quarters. A single bomb was dropped outside in the fields, and the echo reverberated among the hills it seemed for minutes. And today, Sunday, after church, it seems the whole town has gone to the field and is now looking over the bomb crater and the children are looking for bomb splinters. The bomb hit in sandy soil, soft soil, and it is a neat 15 foot crater and I observe with wonderment the ridges, many ridges, that radiate out from the lowest point, the center, to the edge, and I try to explain to myself just how a bomb works when it explodes.

"Oh, Mom, I got one! Look here!" I hear a young boy yell and excitedly he runs to his parents lifting a splinter about an inch in size for their inspection. There is much excited talk, nodding and shaking of heads, but I observe that some of the older men don't say much and only look at the bomb crater and then out into the distance, and I wonder just what they are thinking about.

Now, a few months later I am enrolled in an old-line, disciplined boys school in the country. We have meanwhile become accustomed to occasional air raids on a medium sized city a few miles away. We would hear the wailing of the sirens, we would in good boy school order scramble out of our beds, take along our blankets and go downstairs from the attic where we sleep down several drafty floors into the basement.

On the way down, we come past a number of large glass window panels with a view towards the city but of course we see nothing. All lights are out, there is no light on the streets or from the houses; there is only a pale blue moon. But suddenly the large glass window panes begin to rattle, I even think I can see them vibrate, and this has never, never happened before. At first it sounds like thunder, but in a starry night there would not be thunder. And I catch on-it is bombs. And in between the bombs the sharp cracks of the anti-aircraft guns which begin to open up in larger numbers. We all disappear in the basement, and I don't feel very comfortable. Through all these experiences of early acquaintance with the sounds and vibrations of war, I have a feeling of wonderment what this is all about; excitement because of course it is new especially for boys; and apprehension, I cannot say fear, but apprehension as to what to do next.

In summer 1941, a few days after Germany's march into Russia, I am in the train from school to my home town in the West; it is the end of the school year and I am expected to go into the hospital for two operations, one on my knee from a sledding accident and another on my foot from a soccer accident. I do not look forward to these but they have to be done.

As the train rolls along and the hours go by we suddenly notice the train slowing down. What is it? An accident? A wreck? Some of the adults begin to look out the windows towards the sky in all directions. We are now in the Western parts of the country and there have been bombing and strafing attacks on trains, truck columns and other motion on the ground. And as we come around a bend I look out the window on the side of the other track, and there it is, a train stuck, standing still. The engine is emitting steam from many holes in the big locomotive body and smoke coming out in various places, and we know instinctively that something is very wrong. Then we glide slowly past the cabin and the engineer, dead, leans with his upper body out the open window, and the fireman lies in a pool of blood, thrown against the inside of the cabin. It is a passenger train, many of the cars have holes and gashes torn in their roofs and sides and windows. There is splintered glass, broken railroad hardware, people are rushing about trying to collect relatives, baggage, there is much confusion and some are standing in shock by the side of the track not knowing where to go. It must have just happened. We cannot do anything so we keep on gliding by, and as we see the scene receding into the background our train picks up speed again.

And as I sit quietly thinking about what just went on, one of my schoolmates comes to my mind; he graduated last year in the top of the class, and immediately afterward, with all his classmates, was drafted into the Army. On the last day at school, during mid-day inspection, the teacher of the day with a solemn face told us that my schoolmate had fallen at the front, in the Balkans I believe it was. He was respected and popular, an athlete, a leader, a great guy. Never before had a schoolmate of mine been killed in combat.

I am getting drowsy, but my thoughts are floating to the uncertain future. We will all have to serve and we are willing. What is it like to serve in the Army? In the Navy? In the Air Force? And if that happens to me what happened to the school mate, what is it like to die on the ground, drown in the sea, or fall from the air? Uncertain, uncomfortable thoughts, not of fear but apprehension of the unknown, wonderment whether I will be up to what will be expected, or wonderment how will it all end, how will it all end?

THE PASTOR

It is spring 1942. Events of the war are turning grim. Last summer and fall the German Army was traversing the vast distances of Russia within a few miles of Moscow; many times a day special public radio broadcasts with trumpet fanfare would announce new victories - - but that was last fall. In October, General Winter overnight came to the aid of the Russian armies, and the German advance literally froze in its tracks, as engines in trucks and tanks would not turn over because they were frozen, hundreds of thousands of soldiers shivered in thin summer uniforms without winter outfits, and frostbite, often with resulting amputations, occurred by the tens of thousands. Now it is spring 1942. We all realize the war is now for real. Our casualties mount every day.

We sit in our Lutheran Pastor's study by lamp light in the late afternoon hours, receiving instruction for confirmation. We are 10 or 12, classmates, all 13 or 14 or 15 years of age. Most are farm boys, sons of craftsmen or workers, for whom school and pastoral instruction is not a favorite occupation. We learn psalms, Bible verses, and Lutheran hymns by rote and by heart, and I stand reciting verse after verse. We study the history of the Christian Church.

At one point in the class I ask the Pastor how come that Germany was being rough on Jews when Jesus, a Jew, was so honored? Or was Jesus indeed a Jew? Is what we read and hear the true and the whole story? What and where is the truth? The Pastor gives me a long and caring look, and then he says something about the evil times we are in, that the Kingdom of God is being destroyed by mortal men, and that we must blame our conscience and then rely on our conscience as these days and years roll by. I don't understand it all; it is complicated and gloomy, but I do understand what he says about conscience.

Today is Sunday, and we confirmation students with our clean clothes sit as a group in one of the side wings of the church. Slowly the people file in, and because there are only stone floors, every step is heard throughout the sanctuary. Everybody is wearing black, this is farm country, it is wartime, it is Sunday, and this is a Lutheran Church. After the usual hymn singing and prayers, the Pastor ascends the steps of the chancel and begins his sermon, as always with the words "Dear Congregation".

He starts slowly. He speaks calmly in a firm and audible voice. Soon he begins to speed up and raise his voice, and his hand strikes the chancel rim. At first listening casually, I now begin, with my eyes as well as my ears, to seek to absorb every word. He is elaborating a particular Bible verse, and is now talking in powerful language about the evil of the times, the power of the state, the corruption of state and private morals, the sullying of the truth, death of decency and compassion, and worship of raw physical and political power. There is no doubt in my mind that he is describing the current circumstances. But he names no names, yet everybody understands. As he makes his major points, he leans way forward, his white collar stole sticking out, sweat all over his face, foam in the corners of his mouth, his lips and jaws forming each word as if he were wielding a hammer.

The congregation sits as frozen. Only now and then a muffled cry or sob, because it is wartime and casualties are high. Then he ends his sermon, as usual with the phrase "In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost". Something is getting through to me very slowly but very deep. Evil times: corruption: raw power: the death of decency and compassion. Against this the conscience.

After the final prayer, slowly and without a word, people leave the church and there is no conversation even on the outside portals.

THE CALL

It is the first week in February 1943. It is mid-morning, and we sit in class at the beginning of the period. An announcement had just come through that a school official would speak to the class on an important matter. We wonder. Suddenly the door opens and the official, in brown party uniform, enters with an assistant. In front of the class on the podium after the customary salute, he says that what he has to say concerns everybody in the class room. In a somewhat clipped, but not unfriendly attitude he announces that by order of the government all 15 and 16 year olds are to receive orders for service in the anti-aircraft batteries surrounding the major western cities.

In brief terms I think through the events of these days: in the east in Russia, since months, the huge encirclement of about 300,000 German soldiers at Stalingrad and their imminent end as casualties or prisoners of war. - In the south, in North Africa, we have followed for months the tank battles between General Rommel and General Montgomery, back and forth across the length of the northern coast of Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, and the final defeat of Rommel at the second battle of El Alamein. - In the west, every thinking German is now aware that sooner or later the allies would start an invasion probably on the French coast. - And from the air, since over a year the bombardment of German cities, railways, bridges, industrial facilities, airports had gotten worse and worse and the stories of civilian losses and wide spread damage were horrid, although the government always turns such reports into yet another claim of revenge.

Military and civilian casualties have risen so high that the air defense is being given to "youth soldiers" age 15 and 16, still members of the Hitler Youth Organization, but under the command of regular air force officers and non-commissioned officers.

The swirl of excitement takes hold of me and I share it with my comrades. We had seen our older schoolmates go into service, and some becoming casualties. I liked school and the related work, some subjects more than others, but for quite a while I had had a feeling of what is it all worth, it may get interrupted any time, and then what can I do with all that stuff? We all had a feeling that as young people suddenly we were being taken seriously. Adult responsibilities would be put on our shoulders. Would we measure up? Somehow the appeal to courage, bravery, comradeship, fired our imagination. Only around the edges feelings crept in about how will it feel to be away from home? Will we measure up? What if we are really put to it in terms of carrying out orders, suffering discomfort, sticking with our comrades? Months of the ever-increasing bombing had dulled in us any doubts about war service because what would be more natural than to help defend our home land against the terror bombing from the air? With these feelings we go about our preparations.

The 15th of February 1943 is a rainy Sunday. We had been ordered to form up outside the train terminal in our city at 6:00 in the evening. Each of us

carries a small suitcase with personal items soldiers carry, such as socks, sweaters, underwear, personal items, - and I am taking along three books: my Confirmation Bible, a small book of mathematical formulas because it is my weakest subject and yet what I most need for my intended career as a physicist later, and a paperback manual of automotive engineering, my favorite subject.

In the rain we get on the train, and in the dark night, after a short ride of half an hour, we are ordered to leave the train, to form up and march a few kilometers through a tobacco field to our battery location, Battery D, 495th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Battalion, 49th Heavy Anti-Aircraft Regiment, 21st Anti-Aircraft Division. It is still raining and very dark. We are assigned to our quarters in barracks of temporary wood construction, and are then given free time to "look around".

I take a walk around the battery grounds. In an area of several acres there are barracks, a command stand, a radar placement, and the big gun pits each with an 88 millimeter anti-aircraft gun pointed northwest, and tonight each gun is under a heavy tarpaulin.

I stare at one of these six monsters. The barrel about fifteen feet long, dull gray, with a steely glow about it; each gun in its pit surrounded by heavy breastwork with a zig zag entrance to shield against bomb splinters; the radar a very large dish on top of a big square-shaped box of electronics full of tubes and dials; the optical range about fifteen feet horizontally from one end to the other. A sentry tells me 3,000 63 pound shells sit in the ammunition racks.

Suddenly it gets to me. What had I gotten into? On my way from home for good everything will be new and different, and everything will matter much more than school and home did before, during these wartimes. Slowly I walk back to my barracks. I had taken the measure of the place. My new life would begin tomorrow.

THE DRILL

It is sometime in 1943. We are having a quiet time. There have not been any raids for a while and all across Germany it seems as if the bombers are taking a vacation, or maybe they are just thinking over how to hit us next.

One week after our induction our battery had its baptism (or "smelled the first powder"). It wasn't much firing, but enough to teach the gun crews about gun blast, recoil and clean-up. One of us, a 15-year old, a slight fellow, somehow wasn't braced the first time "his" 88 went off, and he literally was thrown backward against the breast wall. Live and learn.

We are in our boot camp time. Every German soldier must undergo foot drill, or close order drill. Usually the drill lasts an hour, sometimes more, and involves helmet, fatigues, and sometimes gas masks. We are not still a second. "Up the breast works!" "All jump into the pit!" "Form up!" "On the double!" "50 knee bends!" "25 push ups!" "On the double....." And so it goes.

We stand panting, ramrod straight, sweat rolling down our faces, the third finger of each hand glued to the seam of our trouser legs, at full attention. A sergeant, from behind, yanks his hand rapidly downward inside our bowed elbows to see whether we really have our third finger pressed to the seam of our trousers. On his return trip he kicks us in the inside of our knees to see whether we are really standing straight. He slowly files in front of us inspecting us in every detail. He looks at me searchingly and there is a smile, ever ever so faint, while however he tries to maintain a grim expression. I see the blue powder burns on his right cheek and right temples; no doubt he came too close to a gun's breech one or more times, but probably only once; one learns. Before he adjusts my helmet which is slightly askew, he asks me in strict military fashion "May I touch you?", and I give permission. Then he backs off and looks over the entire unit and regales us with instructions about drill discipline. I don't know whether to shudder or to rebel when he says "When I laugh, the devil laughs", and with that he gives us a hard, manly smile.

It all is hard discipline, but somewhere inside is pride. The pride of performing under any and all conditions. Wartime is no time for egos, and egos don't have a place in a tight military unit anyway. He is tough, but fair, and who knows when and how we will need the discipline he teaches us?

Weapons training is the single non-combat activity we all undergo the longest and the most often. It goes on hours at a time, morning, day and night. Either the three basic ballistic values - elevation, side sweep, distance - are read off sequentially, hundreds in succession, or a drone plane flies in the distance and, depending on vision, we pick up the target with or without radar, do the computing and the guns track and you see them slowly in unison turning, ahead of the target.

On one occasion our best gun crew meets in competition with gun crews all over the regiment in an exercise called "mirror shooting". A plane flies a certain

course and the radar and computer crews pick up the target and track it, and a single 88 millimeter gun, connected by coaxial cable, is positioned to fire exactly 180 degrees in the opposite direction. Two movie cameras, one photographing the drone plane, and the other photographing the puffs of the exploding shells, are later correlated, and if the puffs coincide close to the drone target, the crew has done well. - Our gun crew received a high rating.

Slowly it becomes clear to me why all this weapons training. In a flak battery, two things must be learned and trained to exhaustion: picking up targets, and tracking them. Planes are moving targets, and remain targets for sometimes only minutes at a time. The effectiveness of the firing depends on how well targets are picked up and how well they are tracked by each gun. Our trainers train us hard and work on our pride in doing the job.

Besides picking up targets and tracking them, what other training subjects? Aircraft recognition, night vision exercises, emergency procedures, radar interference maneuvers, and so forth. And of course weapons cleaning and weapons maintenance; maintenance seems to go on forever. An 88 millimeter anti-aircraft gun is either filthy after the action, or bristles with cleanliness at all other times.

Each of us has his individual battle stations. During "Alarmstufe I" (full alarm) we are on battle stations within 120 seconds. The rest of the time is Alarmstufe II, which doesn't mean "at rest" but "readiness for action." My non-combat duties involve regular communications watch shared with my buddies, laying and repairing of lines, and I have a special assignment, battery courier. When the telex rattles off a message I rip it off the machine, sign for it, and deliver it on the double to the commanding officer, battery officer, battery command stand or whoever else. I run until I get there, salute, and if the addressee is an officer I request permission to make delivery or to read, addressing him in the third person. Then I get his signature in my log book and return to my post.

Laying telephone lines wants to be learned. With "monkey paws" on my feet and safety belt around my middle, I work my way up the telephone pole, watching the splintered pole surface splintered from the many trips up and down with the monkey paws. One of our men once fell some 20 feet and caught an armful of splinters in the soft inside of his arms.

Today it is very hot. We have been repairing lines and my hands are cut from the sharp, hard, multi-strand wire. And suddenly I remember with a flash the very opposite: during a very cold winter day hanging on top of a tall mainline pole with dozens of wire strands of bare wire, thin and sharp, and I don't know whether it was a full two hours, but my hands were without any feeling, my legs up to my knees felt like wood, and I was praying that we would get through with this icy chore, and I remember when we slowly climbed downward and were back on the ground, how my legs felt like wood and had no feeling.

It seems either too hot or too cold, and a soldier constantly must fight fatigue, extremes of temperature, disciplines, dirt and danger. I never know what is easier: extreme heat or extreme cold? Why is it never just comfortable? And with all the night raids a dragging, leaden fatigue seems to

be with me all the time. What is the relief? Comradeship, some extra food, a day pass, thinking of good times, thinking how lucky we are that we still have our skins on our backs, but this last thought is sometimes too abstract.

We have not had a raid for a while. When will the next one come?

THE AIR RAID

It is early August 1943, early in the evening; a warm night is coming up, the day's haze will soon burn off and a clear night with a half moon is expected. Our battery consists of 2 commissioned officers, 12 non-commissioned officers, 12 enlisted men, and about 100 "youth soldiers", 15 and 16 year olds, mostly of the latter age.

We are located a few kilometers from the center of a large west German industrial city near the Rhine. Immediately adjoining us is a large military air field and a huge railroad switch yard through which roll all the ordinance, ammunition, troops, supplies, provisions for the west, and we hear the locomotives switching all day and all night putting trains together. Our third neighbor is a large tractor factory. Altogether the city is surrounded by 245 "heavy barrels", which means about 40 batteries like ours, most of them 88 millimeters, others 105 millimeters and some 128 millimeters, mostly singles, some quads, and some twins.

I am on communication watch, and just now I have the telephone on my left ear, the complicated forms in front of me, and I'm taking down, as every two hours, the weather report: air pressure every 1,000 meters, humidity, wind direction and speed and many other details. These, together with ammunition temperature, gun chamber measurements and other details are to be set into the ballistic computer. When I am finished I give the completed form to the duty officer who will set all the dials and controls. I complete my log, noting "high probability of attack" due to weather conditions and observations on aircraft activity in the British Isles.

21:41 hours: an urgent ring: "Radar Crews to Battle Stations". I phone the radar officer, and a minute later I hear his four men rush past me to warm up the heavy radar unit and begin the pre-action tuning exercises. I pass the word to our commanding officer and complete the log entry.

21:52 - A continuing ring - "Alarmstufe I" (full alarm). With both thumbs I hit the two heavy electric alarm buttons in front of me. Instantly, screeching claxons can be heard all over the battery installation. The men, cursing, scramble out of their quarters, many only half dressed but with helmet and gas mask and their combat wear in their arms.

I throw a switch and move to my own battle station in the battery command post. And with helmet on without straps, gas mask nearby, I put the phone to my left ear to check in with the battalion fire control officer. We test the line. The line crackles but most words are clear.

Two colleagues are at my side in moments: the radio operator who monitors air traffic fighter activity and crew signals, and the back-up telephone man. Both are "adult" soldiers, corporals in their 30's, one a landscaper and the other a wallpaper store owner. Eight feet away in the looming darkness

I see the commanding officer in his position, and the gunnery officer puts his heavy ear phones and cables over his head and somehow manages to get his helmet in place; he may need it. The ten men in the command stand are at the controls and test their instruments. Each of the guns begins to report ready for action; the required time interval allowed after full alarm is 120 seconds. The last gun checks in 8 seconds later. All guns are positioned at "45 degrees - Sector 10", just about northwest, which is the most likely direction of attack.

21:58 The civilian air raid sirens begin to howl; we have heard it so many times; it is a wailing, shrieking sound and the high and low pitches warn of oncoming danger. Civilians will now move into their basements, and only a few hearty souls, or maybe stupid souls, will stay on the upper floors, and anyone with air raid experience will seek safety.

As yet not much news on my telephone. Massive bomber formations, estimated at over 1,000 bombers in total, Royal Air Force Lancasters, each with a bomb load of 5 tons, now are reported at Kaiserslautern, and we know what this means: the city to the west of us is a gap in the air defense, and before the bombers reach us they like to sneak through that window, and we know we are next.

By now we are familiar with the pattern: at night, such as today, large British bomber forces in tight formations will lay down carpets of bombs, one right next to the other, many hundreds at a time, devastating an entire area of a city in one drop. During the day time, the US Air Force with their B17 Fortresses concentrate on strategic, target-oriented bombing of specific industrial or military installations. They call it precision bombing.

By now we have an idea what is going to happen: for the next 2 to 3 hours wave after wave of bombers over our city; there will be massive bombing, massive anti-aircraft fire; the sky will be lit up with search lights, flares, and the hated christmas trees, clusters of red and green flares being the signal for the moment of dropping the bombs, and the blood-like, orange glow of a city afire.

The pace of incoming orders and advisories picks up, and whatever I get in the phone from the battery fire control officer, I shout to our commanding officer some feet way and enter in my log, and as the night wears on I am doing plenty of shouting and hard listening and furious scribbling.

22:20 Suddenly a shrill call from the radar crew: "Oncoming Targets Identified. More than 100. Sector 10. Closing at 350 kilometers per hour speed. Altitude 6,000 meters." And with this report it is as if an electrical jolt had jump started the entire command post into frenetic but controlled activity. The three basic radar values, elevation, side sweep and distance, by coaxial cable are sent to the computer, and the crew carefully tracks the values, and both radar and optical range slowly begin to turn in the same direction toward the targets. Orders, numbers, signals are called out, and our CO does not fail, as he always does, to shout at us to be ready for the next group of targets, at the risk of all sorts of unmentionable, horrid punishments.

22:22 Now the heavy batteries nearest to the oncoming bomber formations open fire. It sounds like a constant drum roll or like distant massive thunder, keeping up a steady drum beat, and in between, clusters of louder crashes as the first bomb loads begin to come down. The ground begins to tremble. Now we know it will be us in the next few minutes.

I am stepping up my alertness: Priority #1: hearing the battery commands correctly, and this is getting more and more difficult. Priority #2: shouting the resulting orders to the commanding officer and getting his acknowledgment. Priority #3: keeping cool.

22:26 A shrill command from the gunnery officer: "Abdecken!!!" (guns, track targets). Now at the guns, three gunners at each gun, peer with maximum concentration into the hooded dials where the ballistic values, (the results of the 3 basics plus 21 modifiers in the computer), are given for the final firing values of elevation, side sweep, and fuse setting. The guns turn in unison toward the targets.

Seconds later, over my telephone, comes the now extra loud voice of the batallion control officer "Salvo Fire, Commence Firing!", and barely has he stopped and I yell at the top of my voice two or three times in succession this order at our battery CO. He acknowledges with a look and a nod, the order is repeated twice by the gunnery officer. At each gun, the fire bell rings, the loader lifts the 63 pound shell out of the fuse setting cup, shoves it with a mighty thrust into the open breech, which, closing automatically, pushes his leather-gloved hand out of the way; his hand pulls the firing lever and with an ear-splitting crash a 30-foot orange bush of fire spews out of the gun barrel, the barrel recoils the length of over a meter, and the hot, smoking shell casing clangs on the floor of the gun pit; and this maneuver repeats by the book every 4 seconds. Some loaders double load. Meanwhile, the ammo carriers, a handful, keep a supply of shells in their arms at the ready and always one in the fuse cup for the next salvo.

We at the command stand are a little distance away, but we are located to the west of the gun pits so most of the time the guns fire over our heads. Each salvo, it is as if all hearing stops dead as only the blast is heard, and one feels it in one's guts also. We are used to it, and I admire the gunnery officer and his crew, cool as any professionals can be, directing the fire all the while their helmeted heads stick out higher than the top wall of the breast work, so any nearby hit would decapitate them.

Now I am in the thick of it. Firing is underway, long carpets are heard coming down, the night is an inferno of light and sound, and now for me comes the hardest part: every few moments the batallion officer reads off certain altitude figures to me, 6,000 meters, 6,300 meters, 7,000 meters, and so forth and so forth. What do they mean? They are the fire limits higher than which we must not fire because above these limits our night fighters are attacking the bomber stream. I have nightmares of our battery firing into our own fighter formations. It is always the same: hearing with the left ear and shouting the altitude figure and receiving acknowledgment and entering the log. As it gets really bad I pray some, in the manner of soldiers under fire, maybe just a second or two at a time. Just a word or a thought, that's all.

22:35 Now comes the first climax: The bomb run. It is the nightmare moment for the bomber crews in the air and also for the flak crews on the ground.

The bomber formation, maybe a hundred, are over the target area. They have reached the so-called initial point. Flares have been dropped, marking out the area to be bombed. The lead plane has dropped the christmas tree which is the signal to drop. These minutes are the terror because the bombers must, must, must fly straight in a closed formation or the entire carpet does not hit the target; no escape maneuvers permitted.

On the ground we in our batteries are in the reverse position; we know that our area is the target, we know the carpet comes down on us and we cannot escape either. It is as if bombers and battery, though thousands of meters apart, are locked in a deathly mutual stranglehold. The guns fire steeper and steeper, almost 90 degrees vertically. The loaders are pushing out as many loads as they can; this is the crucial firing moment; yet for the loaders to push the heavy shell almost vertically is tougher than firing at lower angles. (During day raids we often watch the bomb bays open when the air is clear and the bombers are not too high, and I have seen the bomb load, as if in a flicker, fall out of the planes before their drop speed is so fast that no eye could follow them.)

The carpet hits. What a relief: it is somewhat to the side of us. There are hundreds of canister bombs and a smaller number of big ones. One very heavy one hits about 60 feet to the side of us and tears a huge crater, and it takes seconds before the dirt and stones torn lose hit the ground.

Meanwhile, shell splinters from our shells fly all over the place. Sometimes they scream like insects with their swirl to the ground. We cherish our helmets not only for the bombs but for the splinters as well. Whatever gets shot up in the air as a shell, comes down in hundreds of splinters. I shudder to think how many all over the city.

The guns fire almost vertically into the air, and there comes the point where the gun crews with all hands possible push the guns 180 degrees sideways to fire at the now retreating target, and the barrel lowers slowly, slowly as the target recedes. Eventually the firing stops for a while.

So it goes through much of the night. There are pauses in the firing, sometimes as much as 10 minutes, sometimes only a few minutes. Pauses are welcome, necessary. A gun pit floor can hold only so many empty shell casings, and gun crews cannot walk on the round hot casings with any safety. At each pause, in a hurry the casings are thrown out of the pit; some of the men burn their hands, each casing must first cool off. There are even moments for a drink of water, wiping off the sweat and grit, refitting the helmet, catching one's breath. Never are helmets on with the strap under the chin, a bomb blast nearby could take the head off along with the helmet.

At gun #3 there is a near-tragedy. In the middle of the firing the loader pulls the fire lever but nothing happens, only the thin metallic click of the firing pin. Immediately, a well rehearsed maneuver takes place: counting the seconds, pulling the lever again, and again the click of the firing pin. The live shell is stuck in the chamber but does not fire. If it explodes this way it can split the gun barrel back like a banana peel and it will be good night for the crew. By a preordained decision by lot, one of the gunners, a 16-year old, after the completed procedure, opens the breech and lets the shell fall back into his arms, rapidly moves through the zig zag entry out of the gun pit and slides the shell down the "dud hole" some 20 feet away. If it now explodes it will explode vertically up, and damage will be minimal if any; a good safety maneuver. The man sweats while he has the shell in his arms, all men are under full cover, nobody speaks. Luckily everything goes smoothly, and that night this is the only round out of 2,500 fired that did not leave the muzzle at the normal 1,000 meter-per-second velocity.

22:57 The next wave: and the next wave: and the next wave: and the next wave: and the next wave: and the next wave: and the next wave, I have lost count but it goes on for an eternity of about 2 hours or so. By now the neighboring residential and commercial districts are burning and their smoke wafts over to us and indeed we can see it in the night. The acrid smoke from the fires mixes with the sulphury stench of the firing. Bits of charred wood fly through the air. Somewhere a siren wails; the electrical controls must have gone off. I hear fire engines.

There is tired chatter among the crews. The CO and the gunnery officer go over some figures, a few crew chiefs call in with problems. The radar is

having terrible problems with both passive and active anti-radar materials. (Passive anti-radar materials, thrown out of the bomb bays, are billions and billions of aluminum strips which, being metallic, confuse the radar waves, but when they have hit the ground, radar operation returns to normal. Active interference consists of little radios on parachutes slowly descending to the ground, emitting counter radar waves blocking the radar operation, these are much, much more difficult. The radar crews have had to change radar frequencies about a dozen times, and the night is not over.)

I am feeling a heavy, dull fatigue. My ears are ringing. I am hungry for something sweet or fresh. I am thirsty. I am hoarse from all the shouting. Taking a pause, the radio operator leans flat against the back of his seat, and my other colleague, head down flat in front of him, looks like taking a nap. I go over the figures again. Did I get them right? What if I didn't? How many lives did all this cost on the ground and in the air? How many lives were lost through friendly fire? How many bombers came down over the burning city, parachutes opening over the roaring fires?

Then, on one of the last waves, a bomb hits just two meters away at the other side of the breast wall, and does not go off. If it is a big one it will wipe out our entire command stand. If it a canister bomb it will make a mess but there is a chance. The CO orders the entire command stand cleared -- except for the three of us. We three look at each other; I make a gallow humor remark. My remark is acknowledged with a grin ever so faint. Not much action from the battalion. A while passes. I don't know who determined what, but a while later the command stand again returns to its positions. The bomb was a dud, it did not go off at least not then. (Duds go off at all times. I remember one huge one going off two days after it was dropped, in the middle of the day: I stood alone not too far away. Civilians tell us duds sometimes are dropped by intent so that when the raid is over and the fire crews and the "grave diggers" are busy recovering bodies and making the first clean-up maneuvers, then a dud would go off and would spread even more terror.)

The next day, 01:11. Finally it is quiet. By now the fires are roaring and we can hear snapping and crackling and shouts of recovery crews. Now comes the wail of the civilian sirens for the all clear signal, not as loud as the original alarm, obviously some of the sirens were hit. A soft rain begins to fall, and in the gun pits the gun crews can hear the rain drops making wooshing sounds as they hit the red hot gun barrels.

Finally also for us "Alarmstufe II" (reduced alarm), which means we can clear up our areas and leave battle stations ready for the next alarm. What has happened during this night to us? Our several acres of battery territory took 52 hits, a few big ones, many canisters. Altogether our 6 guns fired almost 2,500 rounds, which is over 400 salvos, and piles of empty shell casings lie inside and outside the pits. In a neighboring battery a direct hit on the command stand pulverized 11 men, and the grisly recovery work required shovels and water hoses to clean out the remains.

All crews are called to the battery kitchen for a ration of hot chocolate. We wait in a single line, and as I get to the cook who is a gunner, I say something to him but all he can do is point to his ears and look at me with his big eyes, he is stone deaf for the night.

Then I get a special assignment. I am ordered to go outside the battery grounds to determine what damage was done to our telephone and power lines. I disappear in the darkness and check each line pole by pole, and as I am some distance away from our battery, I hear the endless screaming of fire sirens. In the darkness I move toward them, I climb up a road embankment, and there a chain of dozens of fire engines from all the surrounding cities scream past me to help our burning city. And as I look around from my elevated position I see the view: the city is on fire in a sea of red and orange over its entire width and breadth for several kilometers, and the moonlit night is filled with black smoke which hovers like a black casket over the entire city area. I feel nothing and say nothing and just take in this horrible, tragic sight. Beside me the fire engines scream by one after the other; there must be dozens and dozens, and I wonder if they will have water to pump as in raids like this not only fires are started but the fire lines are broken.

After some time, I don't know how long, my task completed, I trundle back to our battery location. I make my report. Some of the crews are still up standing around talking, cleaning up, others are already fast asleep. I am dead tired but nerved up. My best friend also had a bad time of it. After a while the last of us fall into our bunks and it is a sweaty, fitful, exhausted sleep.

06:19 Renewed battery alarm. No civilian alarm. We have had this before: One single observer plane in the clear morning hours of the day flies overhead at very high altitude to photograph the damage. We do not bother as a rule with single planes, although some time back there was a killing hit with one salvo on a single one. I still remember it. We are not in a friendly mood toward bombers, can you blame us, but we understand their grisly task and the terrible danger in which they fly; it is the sympathy of one combat soldier to another although we both try to kill each other. But for this single observer plane to come overhead and only a few hours after the action to photograph the damage, to make ready for the next raid, to know what targets have been missed, - that deep down makes me furious.

But what can I do? Duty is duty. We go through our perfunctory moves and a short while later with the photographing done, we go back to sleep. - Already about noon the heavy ammunition trucks arrive and the gun crews must unload and stack 2,500 rounds, and by two in the afternoon our ammo count of 3,000 is complete again. My buddies and I help the gun crews, and I shudder as we roll the shells down the soft earth steps into the ammo bunkers. What if one of those shells were to explode now? It's one of those soldiers' tricks: if it works and you don't get caught and nothing happens, you do it.

The final task is a massive clean-up job of all equipment, especially gun barrels, and all over the battery all the instruments and controls are being reset for normal routine. If it happens we are ready for the next air raid. - This one was the second in 24 hours; the one the night before was exactly like this one, and our ammo consumption was the same. How many more?

THE FIRE

It is a rainy, foggy, cloudy day in November, 1943. During the morning we had a medium-intensity raid compliments the U.S. Air Force, and because of the low cloud cover the bombers were low and we could hear the drone of the engines more than usual. There were bombs, there were some carpets, there was some firing on our part, but because of the limited vision and cloudiness we had to rely entirely on radar and we had no feel for what really was going on because our view was so limited. The part of town nearest us, mostly residential districts, had received a bad load of canister bombs and many city blocks were on fire.

Suddenly there is a call for volunteers. Six of us respond, and with helmet and gas mask we form up as a sergeant takes charge of the small detail. In a few words he gives us the situation: one of our supply depots outside the battery, in the town, had been hit and was afire: the water lines were broken and the fire brigades were helpless. We had to try to save what could be saved.

After a short march we see the picture: the whole street and all the buildings are burning. Water hoses lie crisscrossing the street with fire trucks nearby, but there is no water pressure. As the fire in our depot rapidly spreads, we see a farmer with a large tank wagon full of liquid manure from his cow stables. Without much formality we requisition the contents. He nods, opens the spout, and we form a bucket brigade. In a moment we all put on our gas masks because of the terrible stench: not a moment too late; there was little ventilation and the yellowish smoke would have asphyxiated us.

I can't recall using my mask for any length and under any effort without hating every minute of it. It cramps my face, my breathing and my body motions. Bucket after bucket we pour on the flames, and gradually we gain control of the fire. After a while further, the fire is entirely doused, and only the aftersmoke is curling from the hot embers.

We reassemble in the open. Off come the masks, hair is tussled, sweat is rolling down our faces into our collars, and with lobster-red faces we look exhausted and are exhausted. We notice the stink, and yet we don't really notice it. It could have been so much worse; there could have been explosions, there could have been duds going off, there could have been a building collapse, burying some of us. So we take the stink in stride. This is war. And when a building burns, and there is no water, you use what is at hand.

The farmer is still standing by his wagon. Hardly a word is said. He seems to understand the priorities: killing a fire when nothing else is available outranks what liquid manure is normally used for. War requires sacrifices.

Nobody back in the battery asks questions.

THE BUNKER

It is an evening in February of 1944. All through summer and fall and winter there were frequent raids. Christmas Day the U.S. Air Force attacked with low level bombing over thick clouds. Not particularly heavy raids, but mean, nasty, at least as far as we were concerned.

A pall lies over the whole city. Blocks and blocks and blocks are totally wrecked. Whole stretches of the city are lifeless. The streets, narrowed by mounds of rubble bulldozed to the sides, are littered with bricks, stones, brick dust, burned wood, shingles, busted window frames, parts of doors, and things from the inside of the houses. There is a stench everywhere of old smoke, of dead bodies, of broken gas lines, of dank cellars, of wet bricks, of mold. It feels as if the entrails of the city had been turned inside out.

Now it is dusk, a surprisingly warm evening. I just finished my communications watch and sit, folded hands over bent knees, on the breastwall around one of the gun pits. We are in Battery B/495, a location that was almost slaughtered a few months ago, right in the inner city, right under the worst bomb carpets, tightly surrounded by industrial and apartment buildings.

Our area lies directly adjoining a street. On the opposite side stands a large overground bunker, - a windowless gray, concrete structure several stories high, of heavy steel-reinforced, high-density concrete with walls a meter thick, and the only openings the shielded entry gates and air vents. Long ago, since the intensive bombing began, the civilians had gotten used to spend their nights, night after night, alarm or no alarm, in this bunker.

As it gets really dark, the population of the vicinity slowly, silently, streams by. Men carry suitcases, women carry baskets or clothes, some walk young children by their sides or in strollers, some carry babies in their arms. No panic, no particular expression, just a calm, ordinary walk like every evening into the bunker, and hopefully coming back out in the morning.

As I sit and watch the people, I muse. We are expecting another raid tonight and it is well these people disappear into the bunker. In their buildings, so many reduced to rubble piles over the cellars or fractured apartment floors, they would be easy fodder for the explosions and the fires. Somehow I feel protective of these people, somehow I feel right to be here, part of the air defense. Where would these people be in this war if there were no bunkers, no anti-aircraft protection, nothing but terror bombing without defense or shelter? - Strange, but one of the women faintly smiles at me and nods. I nod back.

Now I can barely make out the last moving figures disappearing into the bunker. - Where, oh where are we in this war? Will there be an end? Are we over the half-point? What is ahead? An invasion from the British Isles is planned, that we have known for months, but when will it happen, and what will happen then? Will we survive, will our families, and if so, how, - as prisoners, cripples, or how? Somehow it's all getting to me, especially in this inner city location surrounded by bombed-out, wrecked buildings, in this battery that has lost so much blood just a little while ago. - I'll be glad when this posting is over. But when?

THE MOTHER

It is early Spring 1944, late in the afternoon. We have had a number of heavy bombing raids, not so bad on us or our immediate vicinity, but very destructive on the city. Our sergeant's mother lives alone in a small street level apartment deep in the city, and she has no telephone. Our sergeant, her son, is concerned about her and also that she has not been able to hear from him for quite a while. He is assigned to a round-the-clock duty and cannot leave, so he asks me to get news to his mother and bring back news from her. I have never been in the part of the city where she lives, but he gives me directions, and we are used to finding our way from maps and landmarks, even if these change in the course of time and destruction.

I sign out, march off, and after a stretch along a road I catch a ride on a truck that heads in the direction of the city. Where the driver lets me off, it is still a number of blocks, and in the sinking darkness I step to it to get to my destination and back.

Finally I arrive in the block where his mother lives. Almost every building, usually a 4 or 5 or 6-story apartment building, with sometimes small backyard and back alley, is almost totally destroyed. There is hardly any movement, and only very few people can be seen, usually with eyes to the ground, hastily seeking their destination. There is no view to enjoy, and the way is treacherous because of the ever present rubble, bricks, stones and all the other fragments the bombs leave behind.

I locate the address. Like in most German cities and towns, the number is over the door on a small enameled square-shaped shield. By the door are several bell buttons with names, but as I look up I notice that only the street floor is habitable with everything above either collapsed or burned out.

I ring, and way in the back I hear a weak, obviously very old wire-pull bell. I ring twice more, with some intervals; I am on an urgent personal mission and I must complete it. Now in almost total darkness, the front door opens and a small, wizened, haggard looking woman peers up at me, her face drawn, the eyes ringed by dark shadows, silver hair unkempt and falling over her face, all with an expressionless but questioning face. Her hand with thin fingers, gnarled, reaches to her face as she tries quickly to make herself presentable, in front of a stranger, from no doubt an age old impulse, even in wartime.

I quickly explain who I am and what I am here for. "Oh yes", she nods with a faint tired smile and she looks to the ground. "These nights are terrible, awful" she says, "and yes I am worried about you all in all this bombardment". She says she is glad to hear from her son, but then she asks with a questioning look, "How long will it go on like this, and what will be the end?" Then she tells me to wait, she says she knows I must get back to my battery quickly, but she wants me to take something to her son. When she returns, she presses a small package, wrapped in newspaper, into my hand, and she tells me it contains some recent letters and a couple of photographs from soldiers and other relatives within their once large family. One more quick and quite motherly smile, and she shuts the door as I turn and leave.

After a short while it is dark except, I am thankful, for a bright moon, and soon my eyes get used to the darkness. Trained by many night vision exercises, I am amazed how well I can see. I have completed the mission and this makes me feel good, but I am anxious to get back to my post. There have been so many night raids, and from experience I have found that away from my combat post, for some reason, it is much harder when a raid comes. One does not really know where one is; there are civilians whose reactions sometimes need more attention; all this in the utter defenselessness of the civilian world; one feels all this strongly.

The walk back is long and tiring; no trucks this time. Of most of the city apartment buildings, only some of the chimneys and some of the outer walls still stand. Most inner walls and the floors have collapsed into tall and ragged mountains of rubble inside each building, and often are strewn over the street when the street-side wall collapsed or has been shattered. I can see clearly through whole city blocks once totally built up, as the mixture of crushing explosions and gutting fires has totally razed many blocks at a time.

White paint glistens in the darkness on many first floor walls, where the former inhabitants leave short messages with their new address, saying they have survived; but in a ghastly number of cases there is nothing written where death has made an end to all. Where no paint was available, people have managed to fasten cardboard, sheets of paper, even sheets of newspaper with these messages. "The Schmidts now at 11 River Street"; "The Hubers all live, have moved away"; "Meier, Locksmith, business gone, people survived, with relatives in the country", and so it goes, message after message.

A little further on I look up and I really get the proverbial heebie jeebies. I look at a large house, with the bright moon shining through the two nearest windows, in the upper story, and at street level on top of a mound of rubble lies, crazily askew, a piano whose white and black keys, reflecting the moon light, indeed look like the teeth of a skull of which the two hollow windows are the eyes. I guess fatigue, imagination and grim reality concoct the vision. I shudder and hasten on.

As I walk with rapid pace, I hardly meet any people. Here and there a few look over patches of rubble, no doubt survivors looking for what is left of their possessions. Across the street a woman reattaches one of the signs near a door. I notice how few men I see. Most are old, or seriously wounded. Amputees, leg missing yet swinging along on newly acquired crutches, or others with an arm missing and the sleeve folded into the pocket, - all these have become very common. The only men without limbs missing are those on leave, or passing through on some military duty, like myself.

Oh, here again is the familiar stench. The section I travel through was aflame until a night ago. Biting smoke is still curling quietly from beams and splintered wood. Powdered brick, sprinkled like some deathly spice coating over everything, has a strange smell all its own. From gaping basements and cellars comes the smell of moisture, mildew, broken gas lines, and without knowing when or where, the particular, horrid smell of rotting corpses. I wonder how many lie buried under the rubble. Some of the raids have produced

hundreds and sometimes one or two thousand - just from one raid alone. In one place, large bomb explosions have torn big craters into the street itself, and the rubble has been pushed back into the craters. It is hard going around and sometimes over the craters.

What do I feel? I am too tired to feel anything much. An immense pity for the civilian population overcomes me. How horrible it must be for them to sit without any defense or protection, huddled in their basements, and only a few lucky ones in the bunkers, going through attack after attack. A soldier considers his unit his home. I feel good in a tired, war-time sort of way, to return to my unit. That is where my duty is, and that is where my comrades are, and my comrades mean everything to me. I will stand in for them and they will stand in for me, and we all have done this. Underneath is gray frustration and the gnarled anger at war, that life has to be like this, and that people must undergo these terrors. In wartime, feelings don't go far and stay on day by day.

Thank God I made it, I am out of the city, and I am almost back in my battery. As I arrive, I clear myself with the sentry, sign in, and report to the duty officer, and hand the package, the visible symbol and purpose of this mission, to my sergeant. I give him my report, he nods, listens and thanks me, and the last thing he says is "they may well come back again tonight".

THE DUEL

It is a Saturday in May 1944, early in the morning. It is a clear, sunny day and our spirits are high. Since early morning we are in emergency exercises far away from our battery, on the far end of the air field next to us. We had been moved again, this time to Battery C/495, not with 6 but with 12 heavy 88 millimeter barrels, and they are painted pale brown, the color of sand, because they had been part of the Afrika Korps until Rommel's end in the battle of El Alamein in North Africa. Nothing is wasted in the German Army.

Suddenly I notice in the distance clouds of thick white fog rising, being spewed out from large pressure tanks as a maneuver to hide our positions on clear days like this, and we know this means a major raid is expected. Moments later we are ordered to full alarm, and we race back, on the double, to our combat stations.

Being daytime, it is the U.S. Air Force with B17's doing the honors today. There is some bombing, many overflights, and some firing. A mother with her child is killed near us, as she walked along one of the fields trying to get home. It was too late for her and her child. Later in the morning the action is finished and both earth and sky are quiet. The firing has stopped, the bombers are gone and we are cleaning up after the action.

All of a sudden we hear one sole German fighter noisily circling over us in a dog fight with a single American fighter, marking crazy white circles against the blue sky. We wonder why, because fighters are to protect bombers, and the bombers are long gone. As we watch the duel in the sky and listen to the roar of their engines and the ratatatat of their board cannons, I notice one of the fighters, the American, beginning to burn, as gray smoke begins to trail from the engine and by the seconds getting blacker and thicker. As if by mutual agreement, the dog fight stops, the American draws a straight course toward the Rhine which is only a few kilometers to the west of us, and we mutter to each other "that guy knows what he is doing, he's afire, he has to bail out and he quickly gets west of the river". It is well known that the river Rhine with its rapid current makes swimming impossible, and the bridges are totally impassable because of the tight security controls. After a while the burning fighter, still in the air and still trailing ever thicker smoke, disappears in the haze of the western sky, and we turn to the tasks at hand. No more is spoken of the matter.

THE TROOP TRAIN

It is now late July 1944. We are now members of a "Super Battery" of 18 heavy 88 millimeter guns, soon to be shipped to a new location in the east and none of us know where, and even if we knew, we are forbidden to tell. An awful lot has happened in the last few weeks: in May, after 15 uninterrupted months in active battery service, we were sent on "R&R leave" in our home town. It was a number of wonderful days in warm weather and we all enjoyed being civilians again for awhile.

Then, on June 6 I stood, wedged in between other bodies sweating from the hot weather, in a crowded street car and read, from the newspaper of a lady sitting nearby, that allied troops had landed in Normandy. It was only a small black-framed box on the front page, about 4 x 6 centimeters. Instinctively I knew that our leave would be cancelled and that we would be shipped west; well, I was right on the first and wrong on the second; we are being shipped east.

Then on July 20 the attempted assassination of the Fuehrer at his military headquarters in East Prussia. We heard about the early, numerous and widely advertised reprisals, as thousands of actual and suspected conspirators were summarily arrested, imprisoned, and many of them executed.

Now we are being assembled, with other personnel, into a new anti-aircraft unit and we are soon to leave by train to our new destination. If we must, we are willing to get back to military duty, but none of us like the idea of going east, where the Soviet armies have already penetrated deeply into western Poland and stand not many miles from the German border.

We are on a troop train, rolling slowly eastward, all our equipment and personnel in a long string of flat cars and old, worn-out passenger cars. The equipment bakes in the summer heat under heavy tarpaulins strapped to the bottoms of the flat cars. And we, the personnel, are sweltering in the narrow, airless compartments. Whatever mood of expectation or perhaps excitement at the change was among us at the start, is now well gone. Boredom, more boredom, the ordered daily minimum routines and as always, fatigue, set a tiresome pace. We sleep on the floors in the compartments and aisles, a few on the benches, and some of us in the baggage racks overhead. I manage to doze in one of these racks, and I had the foresight, from I don't know where, to choose one where I would be braced if the train were suddenly to stop.

The hours wear on, the train moves slowly, and we increasingly feel like low-priority freight. Every so many hours we suddenly stop, no one knows why, and sometime after an hour or hours, we suddenly start again, briefly forewarned by the metallic tightening of the couplings of the cars ahead of us. Sometimes we are shunted to a side track, and after a while another troop train would noisily rumble by, clackety-clackety-clackety-clack, and then shortly afterward it would be our turn to move again.

Just now we are stopped on a straight stretch. We are not allowed to leave the train, but, as soldiers do at times, we do it anyway. We stretch our legs, we peer forward and backward along the train, and we see the heat

glimmering upward from the hot rails, and way forward we hear the steam engine rhythmically wheeze and thump and cough, and we are glad to hear there is life to the train. We kick the heavy gravel of the railbed. Nearby a man is noisily relieving himself. One of the smokers lights up and the smoke of the cheap wartime cigarette wafts by my nose. Anything, anything, anything just to pass the time.

Suddenly, the by now well-known tightening of the couplings ahead of us, and in a second we are all back in the train, as we slowly start rolling. Out come the cards, the tattered newspaper, the slow talk; some are returning to their naps, and soon the regular clicking of the rail joints tells us both time and space are passing by.

If one just knew what to do with this lousy waiting, I think as I don't know what to think about. Why is a soldier's time so often made up of waiting? Waiting for a new assignment, waiting for some supply or equipment or ammunition, waiting for the next leave, waiting for promised rations, waiting for targets, waiting for alarms and all clears, and so it goes on and on and on. Troop trains symbolize the soldier's waiting destiny in a capsule. But then, what you must, you learn. One way or another, either on a spiritual, or cultural, or entertainment or personal level: one finds one can do something, with difficulty, with all this waiting time. And often, thank God, fatigue takes over and one is asleep, sometime when one needs and whenever one can.

Today, the fourth day, is a clear day with blue sky, and we are sitting on top of our heavy equipment, enjoying the breeze, and watching the landscape passing by in full view. The train slows down to 20 kilometers per hour. In the distance and then coming slowly closer and looming larger and larger, to the left side of the track, there appears a gigantic chemical plant, and from the steam and smoke in varying colors swirling out of the tall smoke stacks, it is clear the plant is in full operation. Soon we get word that this is the last synthetic fuel plant left inside Germany, and since the American air raids on the Ploesti Oil Refineries in Romania, the German armed forces are almost entirely depending on this single synthetic fuel plant for their gasoline and fuel supplies.

As we move close, and as now the plant is directly to our left, a massive irony unfolds in our view: to the right of the track, opposite the plant, over an area it seems to us as far as the horizon, until just days before a wheat field ready for harvesting, a huge carpet of crater after crater after crater from Allied bombing, unfolds before us, one bomb crater joining up to the next one with hardly any space in between.

We are baffled. To the left of us the huge fuel plant steaming away with not a scratch on it, and to the right of us the huge wheat field pock-marked with hundreds and hundreds of bomb craters! What luck! What irony! I think of how many carpets of heavy bombs over our city went down right on target destroying buildings, nature and lives, and here a total miss!

Days have gone by, it is hard to keep track, one day seems like the next; it must be the sixth day. We are now in hostile territory. Our train moves very slowly, especially before bridges because of the danger of sabotage. Armed

sentries guard the track at regular intervals. At one point, during the night, armored rail cars with machine gun turrets are attached to our train, one at the front and one in the rear. Somehow, things are more quiet among us. As if we hadn't known it before, we are made doubly aware this is war. Naturally, no light is allowed when it is dark.

One gray, tired morning, the seventh day since our departure, we roll into a large freight yard and come to a stop. Dead tired, yet wondering what will come next, we pull together our packs and tumble out of the train and form up on the platform. After a while big trucks arrive, we jump aboard and, standing wedged together as in a streetcar, our column moves down the dusty roads to our new battery position. But where to?

THE DECISION

It is now September 1944. We are part of an 18-gun 88 millimeter super-battery, located now in hostile, occupied territory some distance behind the eastern front, and often at night and sometimes during the day we can hear, for hours on time, the artillery pounding away in the distance. It is very hot and dry, it has not rained at all since the weeks we have been here and the dust is everywhere.

Something troubles me very much as I look at our battery position. We are located on a slight incline on a flat plain and easy to see from all sides. That is bad enough, but if the Russians attack with their heavy tanks moving up the slope, we will be defenseless because our guns cannot fire in their minus elevation, that is, lower than horizontal. And it would not take a Russian tank commander more than a minute to figure out from which direction to attack us.

There are very few air alarms and we spend most of our time in the blistering heat shoveling dirt to pile up the breastworks around our gun pits, and the soil is hard as fudge and the work is hot and slow. Our two officers are the worst we have served under since we came into the anti-aircraft service. The CO, a beefy 1st lieutenant, thinks he is God, behaves like a tyrant, harangues us with one tirade after the other. The other, a 2nd lieutenant, slightly built, strikes us as a sissy.

There are the usual restrictions, but because we are in hostile territory restrictions are tougher than before. Nobody leaves the battery grounds. Nobody drinks the cholera-infested water on penalty of threatened court martial. Rations are getting slimmer, the war is getting worse and worse, and you can always tell from the Russians and their artillery how things are going.

We sleep in an old farm shed, on straw and wooden pallets. At night, mice run over our sleeping bodies. Sure enough, a few weeks ago we all began to itch and we knew what it was, - lice. At first we made little of it, we were used to discomfort. Evenings we would sit and take the lice out of our inner seams. By last week things got so bad everything and everybody was infested, and we were officially deloused in one of those army portable saunas, where one sits for two ours in incredibly hot steam hoping the critters, burrowed into one's skin, die. Meanwhile, our uniforms and all our belongings are put into a heat chamber so hot that when I took my uniform out, I burned myself on the metal buttons.

I'll never forget a school mate of mine during the early grades, the son of a baker, whose teeth had decayed into the shapes of brown triangular stumps, and the kid was only nine years old. That has taught me a lesson, and I go to extremes to brush my teeth, but in the greenish, foul-smelling water it is really a chore. I spit until I can't spit anymore to get rid of the water.

Two days ago a master sergeant, who must be some sort of political officer, called our squad together and put it to us to join the Nazi party, the NSDAP. Twelve of us are sitting hunched together in one of the makeshift shelters. On his demand, ten of my comrades sign up, and two of us, one other and I, refuse. Right away the others give us a verbal going-over, but both my friend and I have had it before, and it soon passes.

Why don't we two sign up, when all the others do? I can't put my finger on it, but deep down I feel there is something terribly wrong with Germany, - what is being done, and where things are going. I don't just mean the terrible war, and it now is clear that Germany will lose it, it is just a matter of time, especially since the western allies have invaded France. No, it is something else. Why do party bosses strut around in clean brown uniforms, and I won't repeat what we called the color, obviously well-fed, obviously clean and living in good housing, when all the soldiers we see at home are in tattered and worn uniforms, obviously haggard and worn out from years of front service, many, many amputees and many obviously wounded; and the civilian population being bombed to the limit of endurance? Why is there this constant assertion of victory when obviously things are going in the opposite direction? Why do people disappear without judge or jury, and no one knows where or why, and no one talks about it, and when you ask you not only don't get answers, you are stopped from asking questions.

I feel we all, the whole country, everybody, civilians, military, government, men, women, children, old and young, including those who are considered enemies of the state, we are all in one gigantic pressure cooker. I am reminded of my pastor and his sermons. Something, something, is terribly wrong in Germany and the party is the leadership, and I don't want to join because I feel what is going on is wrong. Maybe this is enough because I cannot give my detailed reasons. I sure don't like war. And compared with civilian life I don't like the military. But when there is war, on such a terrible, huge scale, for a young man service in the armed forces, especially in the defense of cities against air raids, is the only thing that makes sense. Deep down I have a feeling that I would be worse off if I were not in the military. We all have forgotten how young we are.

There is no resolution to these questions. The war will go on to its terrible end and we will be lucky if we are only wounded. Some day there will be peace, coming home to our families, getting back into school which we now have missed already on to two years, having clean clothes, taking a shower maybe every other day instead of having weeks and weeks without one. Some day, some day life will be good again, and it will all have been forgotten.....

THE BOMBER

It is November 1944. Our anti-aircraft duty completed after some 20 months of active service, we are now reassigned to a Labor Service company high in the Austrian Alps, hard at the Austria/Yugoslavia border, and large and daring gangs of partisans make the countryside unsafe. Our company runs night patrols to check on their activity, we push sentry duty around the clock, occasionally we get sent out on bicycles to do repair work on bomb-damaged buildings, and in addition we do infantry training, as the days of heavy armor and artillery are drawing to an end and all German forces are shrinking down to the most basic duty of all: the infantry. Most days the weather is miserable, deep clouds hanging in the mountains, or torrential rains pouring down in the nights, and later, frost punctuating the declining temperature scale.

Today we are on our bikes about eighty strong, pedaling our way down into the valley, again to repair damaged buildings. I am wondering whether I again will be on the roof of a tall building replacing the big heavy shingles and roof tiles, and I remember the last time, I was the last man on the roof and had to find myself a hole to get back to the inside of the attic and close the hole from the inside, - quite a trick.

But my thoughts are rapidly being focussed on something entirely different. As we are pedaling along a straight stretch, to our right lies a wide flat meadow, and as I look in the distance I see a shape, irregular, humped, bulky, fractured, and at first I cannot figure out what it is. Then, in a flash, it is clear to me: a crashed bomber - there had been overflights earlier in the day and we remember the loud, reverberating echoes of the heavy anti-aircraft in action. It reminded us of our gunnery activity.

By now our whole troop has spotted the wreckage, and we work our way into the meadow and soon we behold the tragic scene. It is the front end of a B-24 Liberator heavy bomber of the U.S. Air Force, and the tail end we see way in the distance shattered into many fragments. Nobody speaks as we step through the grass to get close. What must have happened is that the bomber was damaged and tried for a crash landing but then broke in two either still in the air or on the ground, and the front part slid through the grass to this spot.

Death marks the scene. The bodies of four of the crew in their flying suits lie crumpled in and among the wreckage, bodies twisted in lifeless forms, a bent torso twisted almost totally around, another neck with the head looking fully backwards; elbows, wrists, knees and ankles all twisted every which way. One of our men steps forward and takes one of the flyer's body by the shoulders and rearranges it as if the man were resting. As he does this, the limbs during the motion, resembling broken children's dolls, loosely hang and glide and twist. The impact must have shattered every bone in their bodies. There is no fire, no marks of an explosion, and almost no blood. I stare, and the close-up appearance of death makes my mouth dry as all feeling and thoughts are momentarily numbed in the presence of this scene.

While anti-aircraft fire had claimed this bomber and clawed it from the air, we also become aware of how immensely powerful the allied air force is. Besides the bodies, almost the entire contents of the fuselage lies spilled and scattered all over the area of impact. There are cloth-based, printed maps of sections of Germany. There is an open wallet with German money. There are German identity papers. There are emergency escape rations. We do not have time to examine these articles, because before daylight disappears in the mountains we must get to our roof repair job. In one more look I take in the whole scene of the massive, well-equipped, now broken bomber, its lifeless crew, the many supply items to aid the flyers in case of bailing out and escaping through German territory. It was too late for them. I shudder, and something inside again tells me which way the war is going.

It is now two days later in the middle of the night. Deep fresh snow has fallen. I have sentry duty from midnight till 2:00, and then from 4:00 to 6:00 in the morning. While on duty, I survey with my eyes and ears and mind and soul the utter and complete stillness of the mountains, wondering what the next day will bring, as I make my rounds around the barbed-wire fence encircling the closed campground. In the deep, fresh, loose snow my boots fill with snow up to the rim, and during my two hours' sleep break I am not permitted to take them off as I rest in the guard house. The snow turns into water, and during the next watch in the icy cold between 4:00 and 6:00 in the morning the water freezes solid inside my boots around my feet. I receive a mild case of frostbite on my toes.

But my thought goes to the flyers. Snow will have covered the wreckage and their bodies, just as in countless places the war dead disappear under the snow, as if to give them the blessing of quiet and oblivion from the cruel world. Thinking about their fathers, mothers, and sweethearts or wives; they were all young men; and as my thoughts trail off, I again wonder how and when this all will end.....

THE ARTILLERY BARRAGE

It is early April 1945. We are an infantry company of about a hundred men, two officers, several noncommissioned officers. We are a ragged bunch: a few machine guns, a few bazookas, each man with a couple of handgrenades, ammunition belts around his neck, and Austrian replacement rifles which we have not had a chance to test-fire.

By the numbers we are a company, but for propaganda reasons we are called a battalion. We have been many days on the march, marching by night and camping by day. We are in a "tactical retreat" before a massive American force with infantry, artillery and heavy armor. The way I understand it we are to retreat, regroup and then to counter-attack after consolidation with other units. But where are they?

The nights are rainy, cloudy and dark. We are marching through Catholic country, so quite often crucifixes stand by the roadside. Having been raised a Lutheran, nevertheless I understand Catholics, and I appreciate the brief spiritual uplift as I pass by. During the daytime, fighter planes make the area unsafe by strafing, which means we try to stay out of sight. To the West and moving East, massive artillery units are at work around the clock, and the number of rounds being fired must be astronomical. I have got me a nice fever and cough; I am chilly and sweaty in turns, but I keep marching.

Now, for the last four days, we have been on "COL" duty, combat outpost line, our squad of twelve men placed in a thin line a kilometer in front of our main unit in a woody strip, with a wide meadow in back of us as well as in front of us. An armored and infantry attack is expected and we are to run patrols, probe the attackers' strength and keep our main unit informed.

We supplement our thin and irregular rations; a farmer supplies us with freshly slaughtered pork. Some of our men don't know the after-effects and suffer terrible diarrhea for a couple of days. One of our men shoots a deer and we manage to get it properly dressed and hung, but we don't get any to eat; it beats horsemeat and rotted potatoes.

Attack through the woods and meadow is expected any day. There is a rumor of black troops on the American side. We test-fire our newly received rifles. With disappointment, I notice, like everything else in this war, also our weapons are no longer of any quality. I have sentry duty during the night and spend hours in a fox hole with a foot of water in the bottom which I cover with twigs. It is pitch dark. Trees begin to look like people. I speculate whether an attack would be so quiet that I could be fooled, or that the noise of the armor would be an announcement of an attack underway before me. Twelve little men spread out over a wide area, it is not a comfortable feeling.

On the fifth day, early in the morning, one of our patrols in a nearby village is ambushed by a couple of American APC's (armored personal carriers), and a

mad firefight ensues, but our men get out and arrive at our advance line out of breath. That means the attack will come this day, and it is many hours till evening. Everybody is on duty, I have just finished two hours sentry duty, so I take our mess kits, and with a friend, Peter, work my way across the meadow backward to try for one more supply of rations.

Suddenly, mortar fire! Six rounds real close, a few meters away, a pause and then the next six, and so it goes on. We are flat on the ground. We must get out of this!! As we are in softly rolling terrain and I cannot see any line of fire, I wonder where the fire originates, and between salvos I look around. I look in the sky, and there is an artillery observer plane drawing circles over us, and the fire comes from a mortar battery out of sight. But they have our location and are covering us.

My buddy and I are in a bad fix. We decide to run for it. First my buddy, like a track star, out of one of the shell holes where we had found cover, he races straight for our company line ahead of us about 300 yards in the woods. Six mortar shells and then he runs a few moments, takes cover, waits out the next six, and runs again. He makes it to our line. After he is there I take the same route in the same manner. It is always six and then a pause. Why don't they change the pattern? We are lucky they don't.

When we arrive at our main line, tongues hanging out of our necks and totally breathless, we find the mortar fire has already been plastering our main line as well. Except now, the fire really picks up, and for an hour the explosions boom and crash, trees splinter and fall; a direct hit comes down on the command post, but no other losses at least on our wing; everybody had a neat hole dug out except my buddy and myself. I have never hit the ground so fast and dug my head into the grass so hard. - But then suddenly the fire stops.

My platoon leader orders me forward to get my squad out as it is now clear that an infantry attack will follow. Very carefully, staying out of sky view, I move forward. I am hugging the woods, which is the longer way around, because I suspect the artillery observer plane. Suddenly, the by now well known, ominous growl of advancing armored vehicles beyond the hill ahead of me. First one tank comes into view and takes position on the road that runs through the meadow, then another half a dozen more; the growling noise gets louder and keeps on. I reverse my course and move back to make report, and take one more look, and I see it is now thirty-five armored vehicles on a stretch of about 2 kilometers, neatly lined up in front of us with their barrels straight at us about a kilometer away. Behind the tanks, infantry. I must alert the mainline; my outpost squad I have to abandon.

I make my report in a hurry. At this point, our battalion commander, under standing orders not to retreat, takes one look at our small numbers and lightly armed troops and gives order to retreat, to save us from the coming carnage. We know he is risking his neck by countermanding orders.

Within minutes now a murderous artillery barrage begins. The American tanks and armored vehicles break into our woods, firing constantly with machine guns and their 75 millimeter and 90 millimeter cannons. It is a terrible bombardment. Bullets whine and whizz, and many bullets ricochet off dense twigs and trees which hinder the bullets' path. We on our wing had gotten the first barrage, but this one concentrates on the other wing, the right wing, and we are grimly guessing that the losses must be terrible.

Finally the firing stops; the Americans must have run out of targets, and we, lucky to have set off, have a moment's quiet.

It is slowly getting dark, and almost by magic we find ourselves in a peaceful, lovely clearing, like a grove; I enjoy just the view of this little island of quiet and beauty.

But we must move on. It is now dark, and we advance over rain-sodden fields in between burning villages, accompanied now by the constant screeching of the tanks' tracks as well as the throaty growling of the tanks' engines, the noise carries across the fields to us and we are aware that the American tanks now have overtaken us, which means we must hug the cover of darkness and slip through. We are told to be aware of possible sabotage, because, technically, we are now in occupied territory, so we must be extra careful and avoid all human contacts.

We keep on marching through the night. We orient our retreat toward the least noise of tanks and firing, and once again we manage to slip through. Yes, we are following our orders of "retreat, regroup and counter attack after consolidation." But again, consolidate with whom? From our original about a hundred men we are down to about fifty; that is, we have lost fully one half in one afternoon.

I remember the crucifixes. God will not let me die, I will live; we will get through. Somehow, we will survive....

THE TANK ATTACK

It is April 10, 1945, early in the morning, after a few hours spent under a farmer's roof. For several nights before we had to clear each village after the artillery had gotten too close and only minutes later the American troops had occupied the entire area. Last night again we were lucky, clearing out just in time. How many more times will our luck hold?

We're down to zero as far as anything heavy goes - no artillery support, mortars, bazookas, machine guns, or any armored pieces. Each man has his third-rate replacement carbine, one or two belts of ammo, maybe a couple of handgrenades. No support units at all.

I am still battling with the fever I picked up ten days ago, so I walk over to the dressing station in search of double aspirin or something, to cool the fever but to no avail. There a bunch of badly wounded men are lying in the moist straw of an old barn, and the doctor is bending over them, trying to patch them up with newspaper, toilet paper and old rags; regular issue medical supplies long ago have given out; none of our units have any medical equipment or supplies. The men bleed into the straw and hold on to what cheer the few medics and the one doctor pass out to them.

On my way back to the house I make ready to visit the farmer's outhouse when "WHAMMPPP-OOM", with a devilish howl, a tank shell crashes past me into the house opposite, ripping a big chunk of brickwork out of the side, sending it spilling over the street, and the echo claps between hillsides and houses. Other shells rapidly follow. In seconds the village is in a wild commotion. "Combat Squad - position in woods outside town" is the order yelled to me. Hastily I grab rifle, ammo belts, handgrenades and the canvas breadbag around the waist. A quick "Thanks again" to the farmer people, and off into the street.

In the village the ragged remaining German units are clearing town without halt. Small officers' automobiles (whence the gasoline?) screech past slower moving horse wagons; stray soldiers gather from houses here and there and join into the column now moving heavily out of town; dust billows about wheels, hooves, feet; packs are thrown onto wagons; and so the trek, like something out of "War and Peace", worms its way into the open fields outside the town; we of the "Combat Squad" on the double to take up our positions across an open field in the woods, and then to "counter-attack".

The road is straight out, over a rise a half a mile away. Trees flank the road. The woods are hundreds of meters to either side. That road is our doom. For endless minutes we are like fleas on a hot frying pan, totally exposed to enemy fire.

Five tanks had emerged from the hills beyond the town, sighted us, sent the first probing shells into the houses. Now they lay full fire on us from every barrel. Tank shells, machine gun fire, rifle fire, - all hit us in a fury.

Shells crash in front of the horse teams and send them rearing up with their manes fluttering high; machine gun bullets pierce between feet and past heads, kicking up dirt as they hit the ground. Through this we move on the double, in classic drill style: run a few yards, full cover; run, cover; and so on to get out of this mad barrage.

A shell tears into the road a few meters to my left. Something hits my chest. It feels small, I rub over it to get rid of the first itch. It feels like a rock splinter. I give it no more attention.

Five minutes later, just after jumping up from crouching under a tree, - a massive blow against my back, a searing pain in my neck, and immediate lack of breath. A shell had exploded a few meters behind me in a tree and threw a heavy chunk of tree trunk at my back. "This is like in soccer" I think, "when you get a ball into your solar plexus". At first I make nothing of it. But very quickly my breath runs out, a strange, paralyzing weakness creeps all through me; and as I recover from the first shock I find that my right arm is as limp as a wet rag, hanging from my side. I cannot help it, but I sink to the ground. Only then, after a few moments, do I notice the sand crunching between my teeth, and the wet earth in my face: Yet another shell had exploded straight in front of me, perhaps five meters away, and sprayed me with the dirt it tore from the ground.

As I gather my senses, I notice the scene around me: my comrades are running past me, laden with ammo and here and there a bazooka, still the machine gun bullets whip into the grass, still the artillery pounces with loud, cracking explosions all around us.

Now all my buddies have worked their way past me, scrambling for the nearby woods. Almost one of the last ones, there staggers past me, bazooka heavily pressing him down (he is a thin, delicate fellow) one of my pals, and I yell at him "Have I got a hole there?" and point with my left arm at my neck, where, as the minutes build up, the pain sinks deeper and deeper like a knife. "No - only black in the face" he yells back, and he is gone. - A few more men, and I am alone.

Gradually - the firing stops. From the ground I look back toward where the tanks must be now. Through my dulled senses I see a few men nearby, lying crumpled and on their backs; one or two still seem to move slowly, rolling their heads and chests, with limp limbs. The man nearest from me lies, cross-shaped, face down in the grass; he died fast: the same shell that hit me in the back, hit him with all its clawing splinters straight in the chest; he let out one tortured, almost triumphant yell, and fell with a dull thud flat onto the ground; he moved no further. I cannot see much more; nothing else is in sight. Am I the only survivor?

After some more minutes I begin to realize that I must get out of this open field if I want to survive. My ammunition belts still hang heavy around my neck, and the long-handled handgrenade still is jammed into my belt. I quickly try to think whether I should pull the fuse on the handgrenade and throw it away from me into the meadow; but I decide to leave it as it is. So with one painful pull of both hands, turning my belt lock, I let belt, grenade and ammo fall to the ground. And as I so take off my remaining weapons I realize that the war is over for me, and that when I lay down my weapons I make a decided end, for myself at least, to six years of war. I am changed from soldier to non-combatant, and with a glimmering trust in my Creator, the goodness of man even in war, and the Geneva Convention, I decide what to do next.

Very slowly I get to my feet. I am now alone. Before me lies a stretch of flat meadow, perhaps 300 meters long. I hold my left arm away from me so any American can see I am unarmed, in need of help, and not going to resist further. As I reach the edge of the woods, after what seems like an interminable time, the air seems to run out ever faster; and as I crouch to clear under some branches, blood begins to trickle out of my mouth. I find a small shallow gully and lie down on my back; I will pass whatever is left of the day lying flat, out of sight of troops.

Two German lieutenants, both young, "ninety-day wonders", clean and green and without the marks of war on them, separated from their units, suddenly stand over me against the bright sky. "If you walk, it'll kill you; try to get medical care if you get the chance. You bleed out of the mouth, you probably have a ripped lung. What's your unit? ....OK we'll tell them if we run into them in this mess. If you get taken prisoner, don't mind, it isn't any shame now anymore. We'll be off. Good luck....." and they disappear breaking their way though the snapping twigs.

So now I am again alone. No more Germans, nothing but Americans somewhere all around me. "Help me, I am wounded" I will say. Who knows what'll happen then.

In that mood, drowsy, tired, no idea of what may come next, the hours trickle by, slowly. Only the terrible pain, all through my shoulder and right side, keeps me awake. Just so I don't fall asleep or faint, I think, it could be the end of me. But I must remain quiet: a man in pain tries, like an animal, how he can find shelter to lick his wounds. A horrible thirst begins to dry me out. It must be mid-day. Only now I find that when I was hit I lost momentarily all control over my muscles. "Schoolboy", I think.

The thirst gets torturesome. Though the April sun is yet only faint, with the thirst it gives me the illusion of intolerable heat. When will the day be done? When will the sun creep behind that next branch so that I can get just a little shade?

I hear an American infantry patrol roaming through the flat field just outside "my" woods. They are sure of themselves, they yell to each other, and then fade away into the distance.

Four or five heavy tanks roll over the road where their guns chewed us up earlier in the day. Chains clank. The motors growl, pantherlike. I flatten myself deeper into my ditch. They shall not find me.

How long I lay here, I cannot tell, as I awake from what must have been a stupor-like sleep. It's dark, so I must have lain here maybe nine hours, since eleven in the morning. Yes, stars I see now in the sky; it must be night. Cold hovers around my legs. Now I can see the individual stars glimmer blue and cold, yet somehow friendly, through the twigs which look black against the ink-blue night sky.

Now I am fully back to my senses. I've got to get out of here! I'm hurt deep inside; I can't remain out in the night. Slowly, like a camel raising itself from its folded knees, I turn and bend and shift to get up on my legs; because of the excruciating pain I have to do it slowly. But just as I am in a crouched position, something makes me freeze into utter stillness.

A stonethrow to my right in the darkness, the twigs snap and crackle. Something moves toward me. I cannot see anything. The noise of something breaking through the underbrush becomes louder and louder. Deer? Troops? Finally here it is: about ten meters away from me. A long string of figures, laden with rifles, ammo, bazookas, soundlessly it now seems, staggers past me, one by one, two meters apart, then a few huddled together, then some more, strung out. Now and then a messkit faintly clanks, or a trench spade thuds against a thigh. Not a word is spoken. I shut my eyes halfway, from habit, so my eyeballs cannot be seen. After an eternity I can breathe - they are past. Good that I did not make a sound - if these were Americans, I might have been a dead man now; if Germans, they also might have triggered right at me or dragged me along.

I think: there marches, like a thief in the night, the last German soldier. Pocketed by day, under cover in the woods, by night he sneaks through the loose mesh of the enemy pocket to find other Germans, just one more German unit, before he inevitably gets shot or captured. The noose is thrown, like a net over flying ducks, is drawn tight, and then scramble whoever can. A respect, a sympathy, for these men overcomes me. They are open prey opposite a crushing enemy force, like small animals of the woods. Long bled dry of any fighting force, they now must flee the all-consuming forest fire that rolls toward them without letup, that will envelop them, one by one, and gather them into one of the ways of a soldier's downfall - death, wound, or prison.

THE PRIEST

It now must be midnight, April 10, 1945. Total stillness surrounds me. A cold, clear black night sky domes over the forest; a whispering night breeze distantly whines up in the crowns of the trees; here and there a leaf, dead since last fall, turns with a tiny crackling sound; and as I slowly bend over, move forward toward the edge of the woods, twigs snap under my feet. Before me spreads the meadow, scene of this morning's ambush. Not a sound, not a light, not a movement reaches my probing senses. Only nocturnal silence, beautiful as all silent nights are, lies all around.

Slowly, carefully I move across the open field toward where I saw the red-tiled rooftops of the little village, hours earlier, out of the angle of my eye peering over the grass, while lying on the forest ground. My feet function as usual; but in my chest the alarming lack of air, with a rising fever, and an excruciating pain, forces me to step carefully. Now and then I step into a hollow, and as my body tries to balance, a flash of extra pain grips my chest.

As I near the village, I let my arms, like drooping wings, hang down my sides. Weaponless as I am, I crave for no shooting at this time. I try to be sure no sentry or patrol, hearing me approach, will fire at me.

The village seems utterly desolate. All buildings are intact; not a trace of battle can be seen; shutters are closed; no vehicles, wheelbarrows, farm tools and other human traces can I see. Not a human being anywhere; no movement, no sound, no light gleaming from behind bolted shutters. And best of all, no soldiers of either side. Only - as sudden as a thousand grenades in the midst of deepest silence - a dog bellows loudly, furiously, for a few minutes, - and then, as suddenly, stops.

As I walk up the middle of the deserted street, I get the feeling that I have been here before. Yes, over there, across a little open space, that house with the large crucifix statue, hewn in stone out of the front wall and ringed with ivy. I got something to eat there just two nights ago, receiving wonderful fare from the German mother and her daughter. In a minute I stand at the door, full of hope, rapping against the wooden boards. An unseen window above me opens, and a harsh male voice grunts "Who's there?" "Can I get help from you, I am wounded". "No, too bad, the landlord isn't here; I can't take in any Germans anymore." Bang! - and shut slams the window.

Across the street is the parsonage. Again I knock on the door. It opens; there stands the Catholic priest, his white collar shining from his black frock cloth, his housekeeper, candle in hand, before him. "I got shot in the chest this morning, can I get help from you?" Only a moment's hesitating, searching look - then: "Officially we cannot take any German soldiers into the house, but come in, we'll see what can be done. The Americans were here this morning and took the town; but they were only advance patrol tanks, and then went right on; but tomorrow their supply people and all the regulars will arrive."

The housekeeper immediately goes to work. She makes me sit down in a kind but forceful manner. She takes off trench coat, tunic, sweater and undershirt - slowly, for arm movements begin to hurt terribly. The more clothes she takes off, the more they seem to be glued to me. Only then do I find out that the undershirt is one sticky mess of dried blood. She moves all the clothes, a basketful, back to the washkitchen, washes me as best she can, and puts me into a new, snow-white set of the priest's underwear. Then she gets me water and canned fruit to eat, the one thing I had been craving for all day, the one thing I had any desire for at all.

The first emergency treatment over, she binds up the two holes in my body, one on my left chest, the other behind my neck - one a small fleshwound, the other a deep gash - but about the growing hell inside she cannot do anything.

The parson talks things over with me. He sits across from me at the table. "When have you written home last?" I told him of the letter I wrote April 9th, yesterday, in the farmer's upstairs room, while the artillery began shelling the small town. "Your foster mother sure would be surprised to see you now, a day later." "Yes, but who can tell in this war," I answer him.

"We'll put you here on the living room sofa for the night, the housekeeper will look after you, and tomorrow, when the Americans will move in with all their trek, we'll have to report you to them." Yes, I answer him, glad that our conversation had come to an end, for my breath begins to tighten up and to come thinner and thinner, so that speaking becomes laborious and almost impossible.

A fearsome night now comes up. It had looked so quietening and serene out in the forest and on the meadow. Now, hours later, perhaps two or three in the morning, it turns into what seems like a feverish prison cell. Only half a meter away glows the candle which the housekeeper had set on the table to keep light during the night, but which now seems like the source of all the agonizing heat that envelops me. Dimly the table reflects the candle's sizzling-white light, so it seems; but beyond that lies the evil darkness of the hot room. Under me the sofa's unaccustomed softness multiplies the sweltering discomfort. My head dances and lies still as if chained to earth, in turns. Feverish figures, sometimes two combined into one, of recent and past days alike, blur in front of my inner eye. Wracking pain from all over the world seems to focus deep in my chest. Sweaty stupor changes station with bright waking. A hundred times, it seems, the door opens and the voice of the housekeeper comes "Can I get you anything?" While really an angel of needed care, she seems to my fevering mind like a devilish ceremonial mistress looking in on her victim. When the candle burns low, she changes it; they all were red candles. Red candles are the hottest candles. Their heat is the most painful one. They burn everlastingly hot and steady, unremitting. All through the night, through eternity, candles, candles, candles, candles, candles.....

Through the windows comes the maidenlike, cool light of the morning. The parson sits on a stool, leaning forward toward me, looks me deep in the eyes. "How was the night?" "It'll be better tomorrow". "Look; I must turn you in. The Americans are being tough about keeping German Landsers." "All right, tell 'em. I need medical care. I know you have to tell 'em." "I'll be back in a few minutes."

By now the shaking and rumbling outside the window had been going on for almost an hour. The little parsonage, hard at the unpaved main village street, trembles in all its foundations each time it happens. First a toneless growl, mixed with screeching and clanking, then a growing, thunderous roar, perhaps some yells with it, perhaps even a jazzy radio - and then the tremor of the little house. From the side of my eye, each time I see the big hulk coming closer, khaki brown men sprawled over it, a long antenna swinging like a giant whip, and then billowing dust, as it rolls by and disappears.

American Sherman tanks on their way up front! One by one, with short pauses, seemingly endless chain of heavy armor rolling into action! And as I lie and listen and watch, the fighting part of the war ended for my little person, the crushing might of Allied force against our pitiful remnant drives home to me, formerly sensed, but now in waterclear revelation, the utter, utter senselessness of this war. I feel like jumping up and flying with eagle speed to shout to my friends, pals, buddies and comrades "Look! Cut out the fighting! I've seen what the Americans got! It's useless, no matter what our leaders say! Make an end to this bloodbath, this slaughter!" I almost feel the first one of this long chain of tanks already making contact with our men - zeroing in on small human targets, loading a shell and firing - zeroing, loading, firing - , and I almost scream over the din "Stop it! It's over. The war is over. The war is over!" - But while I feverishly think, the tanks roll on, relentlessly, brutally, victoriously.

Finally the spell comes to a sudden, realistic end. One of the tanks turns into the driveway of the parsonage. Although that side of the room is windowless, with all my senses now alert I feel the hulking, dangerous presence of this tank only a few feet through the wall from me. I recall, in my feverish state, how feared tanks are in our infantry, in all infantries of the world. No one ever comes close to one of these, unless it is running and slinging a vicious mine with one swing of the arm, catching it on one of the hooks or caterpillar tracks on the tank, and then away and hitting the dirt for full cover. And then immediately an ear-splitting crash, as the turret flies up into the air, hurtling to the ground nearby with a murderous thud, and instantly the ominous crackling of flames, then the busting of the ammunition, as the tank dies, like an elephant deadly hurt on a jungle safari. Pity the crew! - If the tank was worth salvaging, ears, hair and fingerbones would be scraped off its inner walls, or a splintered head would be picked up out of a steering wheel or the gun assembly. - Or, it would be one man with a bazooka against one of these Shermans. The man would sit, wait, his heart

pounding out of his chest; for in seconds the tank would come within a hundred or fifty meters, the man would fire, and as the slow-flying warhead from the bazooka would lumber toward its armored target, a snow-white cloud where the man lay would emerge as a deadly give-away; and then it better was having hit the tank mortally, or saying one's last prayers. With a shudder I remember such a suicide commando, with three buddies, - but then we were ordered back in the last minute.

But all this dreadful nightmare is past now; the tank is harmlessly crouching a few feet from me, jazz playing on its radio, the men calling out to each other lazily, as they emerge from their shell and make for our house. The parson's housekeeper shows her presence of mind: My wet, washed uniform has been hanging by the side of the house; knowing, that this would lead to trouble, she quickly gathers it up in a wash basket; covers it with small kindling wood, of'which every German country house, even in war days, has a large stock.

Seconds later, the door to my room opens, and a large, hulking khaki figure, helmet with strap dangling on the side, gives me an inquiring stare. Our smart little housekeeper pipes up "He's a German soldier; the parson's just down in the village reporting him." Somehow satisfied, the hulking American, the first I had seen close up, goes out without a word.

Minutes later again loud steps on the stairs; this time, several people. In comes the parson pointing toward me, and with him an American doctor with a medic. The doctor is a young man, clean-looking, surprisingly clean-looking; he is even well-shaven. Very matter-of-fact he looks me over. With his broken German and my broken English we get our ideas across to each other. I explain that a shell burst three meters behind me, busted a tree apart, driving the splintered wood against my back and shoulder tearing a hole in my neck. The doctor diagnoses something I cannot understand. I must swallow eight pills in a row, with lots of water. 'Pill doctor' I think with a vague feeling of doubt. And to confirm my doubt, the medic reaches across the foot of the bed, and with a smile, offers me a cigarette. The doctor almost bites his head off. Then he tells me I am lucky I am regular army - had I been in the Waffen-SS, medical care would have been refused.

Already going, the doctor turns back "I'll keep you here a few days, to get you on your feet." And then, turning fully back to me, he asks me why I had stayed with it all clear to the end. Somewhere I feel anger welling up, and I answer him "I gave an oath to my fatherland to do just that." He looks at me from the side, contemptuously, says he will come back tomorrow, then the fever (104.8 degrees) may be down a little, and he'll ask again.

That night, the fever doesn't go down; it goes up. It is worse than the first night. I start panting like a dog in summer time. Like the first night, again there is a lit candle; again the housekeeper comes in every half hour, inquires what I want, brings me some liquid or fruit; and it is much like the first night, only much hotter, more feverish, more full of nightmares.....

THE FIELD HOSPITAL

The next afternoon, the doctor wakes me and tells me to be ready for moving into a field hospital. "Can you walk?" "Nein." So, two litter carriers put me on a stretcher and carry me down into a parked Army ambulance, and the youth of the little town has a moment's spectacle, as I am stowed away in the interior. In the last minute the parson reaches over to me with a full set of clean underwear, wonderful peacetime quality, and as I lay it close to me, I am too foggy to thank him.

The doors slam shut and I am alone again. Then the trip to the field hospital begins, two black drivers in front, I in the back. Although they try hard to heed the doctor's orders to drive slowly, there are just too many potholes in the worndown German country roads, and each and every pothole, rock, or rim, seems to cut right through the axles and wheels into my chest. For an hour or so we bump along until we stop amidst tents, sentries, ambulances, jeeps, litters and litters of wounded, at the U.S. Army field hospital. From the distance, I reckon it to be near Wuerzburg.

The American standard procedure for checking in wounded prisoners is very efficient. My last and only possessions - a spoon, a pair of shoe laces, a nail clipper, a medical thermometer, and a small bottle of alcohol lotion (which a kind neighbor had given me before moving out, never realizing that soon after I was to use it to keep myself from passing out) - are taken away from me. Maybe the Americans fear that I am some important war criminal and that I might stab, strangle, poison or cut myself to death with these instruments. Only a small copy of the New Testament they let me keep, after my protesting "That's a Bible", and somehow I know that in this bloody war this book would enjoy international free passage - certainly with the Americans.

The rest of the reception routine is just that, routine. Identification, medical checkup, half a dozen x-rays, and then a long wait in some assembly tent.

From my stretcher I observe the busy scene around me. There are tall, gaunt, sometimes quietly laughing, figures slowly walking about in pajamas and hospital robes; maroon or dark blue. There are mostly white men, but some black ones of dark or lighter hues, and there are also Asian types. All this diversity is new to me. I study them with interest, but also with vague apprehension, I cannot tell why. Perhaps it is because I realize I have just emerged from the most nationalistic, racist environment into one as wide as the world; and I know which is the victor.

Then, as if to wake me from my reflections, a nurse puts a quart jar of water by my stretcher and gives me to understand that I must drink seven of those each day. I start right out ignoring her orders, as the water waits and gets warmer and warmer. I am just too tired. And as if to welcome me to this humane institution, a young orderly comes by and flips a pack of cigarettes with matches on my blanket. They are Raleighs, and the matches are of wood, in a small box.

Next, two medics, bending heavily over me, push two rubber hoses into my throat and in seconds I feel the heavenly comfort of supplementary oxygen fill my lungs. It is wonderful, what a difference! With the back of my tongue I close off the oxygen inflow and instantly I again pant rapidly to get air. Back to the extra oxygen, quick!

Another medic administers blood. Needle in elbow, I squint at the jar slowly emptying, and then the medic connects another. I nod to signify thanks.

Over the hospital noise we hear occasional, distant shellfire and fighters at low altitude - we pray they aren't German.

Several hours must have trickled by. It is now deep in the night. As the litter carriers bring me into the operations tent, I can see the inky sky high above me with the stars glittering like lively diamonds. We move along endless streets in the tent city which is this American field hospital, tent after tent, an uncertain glow from the inside glimmering past me as I feel my body rising and falling softly in the even rhythm of the litter carriers. Then suddenly the bright light of electric lamps, and I am set on a high operating table in the operations tent.

For a few moments in this deep and yet so active night I think back on the past few hours. The searching, warmhearted eyes of the first doctor as he looks into mine; the delicious relief when the oxygen is pumped into my lung hour after hour for some seven or eight hours; the timeless, unhurried drowsiness of just lying there and waiting; the black, gooey blood the doctor drew out of my right side; and the relief when I was told the treatment was all over.

Here in the "O.P. room", as we Germans call it, there is no more waiting, there is hustle and bustle. The tent flap opens, and in come, again and again, two litter carriers with a freshly arrived patient on their stretcher. Usually the head, or perhaps the chest, or the leg, is wrapped in shining white, newly changed bandages. Sometimes there is a small red spot, sometimes it is large and brown. Sometimes the blood oozes or runs out of a skull bandage over a face down into the blanket. Sometimes the head lies awfully still. Other times the head lolls loosely from one side to the other, as the arms dangle uncontrolled over the stretcher side. Seldom is there any noise. Only the spasmodic jerking of the head tells when the man is in horrible pain. I reflect on these hospital colors: white bandages, red blood, olive tents.

Directly on my left side a man undergoes a jaw operation. Two doctors in white coats and headgear bend over him, and the nurse brings instruments. The man begins to scream terribly. He is "under" all right, but probably not enough. Or maybe they can do the operation only with local anesthesia. His jaw and neck are a mass of red and white strands, flaps and deep gashes.

Over on my right another man's leg is being amputated. The doctors are just getting the skin flaps ready that will forever after cover over the cut surface. He is "all under", and not a noise comes from his still body. Only his belly heaves up and down slowly as he inspires the anesthesia gas.

A third one, farther away from me, has his belly wide open. All I can see is this bloody silhouette: the surgeons lift strands of his intestines, dark and shiny wet, out of his inside and carefully lay them on the outside. I never realized that a man has that much intestine. The smell is of medications, disinfectants, and warm human flesh. But the room is efficiently clean, matter-of-fact, brightly lit.

Now it is my turn. Two doctors stand opposite a projection screen, and my x-ray is up for inspection. There is the chest, its right half entirely white, and a clean level line as high as the armpit shows where the water and bloody liquid has found its level. Two bright white spots betray where two shell fragments are lodged - one in the upper and one in the lower chest. Only now I sense what has happened to me: much more than I thought at first.

Then a pretty nurse (but then maybe all nurses the world over look pretty to a wounded soldier) busies herself over me. And soon, after about two dozen local injections where the two fragments entered, a surgeon begins to cut into the wounds to clean out the ripped and festering flesh. As he cuts deeper and deeper, I marvel how clean and sharp this pain is compared to the pulverizing pain of the first days, and this is now over three days after I was hit. As he finishes, I have been under almost continued treatment for ten hours.

Again two stretcher bearers carry me back, again through the still dark night, again past many tents with their uncertain inside glow, until we turn off abruptly into one of them. A gruff medic, blond and strong, points me to my cot, and pitches my gray-green uniform in a bundle under it. To finish off this night as it already turns into morning, I finger through one of the neat American Overseas Edition paperbacks - to work off the many "locals" that first make one drowsy, but then very much awake; but after a few moments I finally fall asleep.

But soon the night is full of life again: Everything is dark and wet; I am terribly tired, and somehow every bone and limb aches in my body; we are again a company of infantry in fieldgray; every man carries a machine gun with full ammunition and they wear us down; we move through the dark, dig in, then move again, dig in again; everything is one mass of rain, pain and tiredness, and all into the night we march, dig, march, dig, and march into all eternity. Only the rough but caring towel in the hand of the night medic - not the blond, strong one - makes an end to the nightmare as he dries up my sweat and for the tenth time picks up my blankets from the floor. And so the first night in the hospital thins out into a gray, moist, chilly April morning.

Khaki uniforms.....scurrying figures....a large white medicine cabinet against the dark-olive tent wall.....and then, as if ascending from a dark, dimly lit ocean floor, I can make out my surroundings. There is a tray in front of me on my blanket, and an American nurse is feeding me - with a spoon: she is spoonfeeding me! It is something like oatmeal, - yes, oatmeal it is. Then, after a while, she asks me questions. I tell her I have a mother in the States. She tells this to the other medics. His mother in the States! "We'll take him along with us", they say, and that the war is almost over anyhow; then they'll all go home and take me with them. But I give them to understand my home is in Germany, that there is where I was brought up, there is where I want to return. Slowly, between spoonfuls, I wake up.

I notice anxious talking, sighing, even some crying among the American staff. Why? I ask. The American President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, had just died. I had no feeling about him personally, but I think he must be a powerful man to govern such a huge nation and war machine.

After breakfast I study what surrounds me. A long tent. Two rows of cots, every one filled with a wounded man. The heads are always against the sloping tent wall; the feet are always against the narrow aisle which runs along the center of the tent. Most often the wounded are Americans; they talk, slowly, with each other. Some of the men are Germans; they talk only little; most of them are severely injured; they either are in too bad shape, or they are afraid to talk in German in the midst of American men. One can tell which is which by what color of uniform lies under the cot, on the stamped-down grass: khaki means American, gray-green means German.

In the middle of the tent is the medical center: several large white cabinets with all sorts or racks, trays, jars and instruments lying on them; a half dozen medics are constantly busy preparing injections, washing instruments, tossing bloody bandages into buckets, emptying bedpans; there is concentrated activity mixed with busy movement. One has so much time in a hospital to study the world around one, especially as one emerges from anesthesia.

The tent flaps open and shut every few seconds. A medic carries a waste bucket, full of bandages, human waste, bloody spittings or nausea out to be incinerated. Two litter carriers come in with a man on the stretcher, his uniform still on his body, limp limbs, an arm dangling down the side, the head uncontrolledly lolling from one side to the other; a large, wide, snow-white bandage wraps all around his chest but a bright red, fresh bloodspot appears already on the middle; the man smells of medications and disinfectants. They deposit the man, wordlessly, with help from one of the other medics, on a cot. - On their way out, they pick up another man to go into the X-ray room, and only moments later they are gone. And so it goes, on and on.

Every quarter hour or so one medic makes the rounds with the bedpans. In each hand he carries a few and jingles them against each other, the way a scrap pick-up man going from house to house, jingles a few pans and cries "Scrap, old iron, rags, waste paper....!" And that carries me back to peace times, the old country, when scrap men instead of bedpan medics make the rounds, when men lie in hospitals because they fell from their garden ladder instead of because they shoot each other down, systematically, intelligently, efficiently. When a man needs a pan, all he does is raise a weary arm, or perhaps give a low yell - and the medic takes care of him. All medics are great, more or less; this one is an angel. We patients depend on the medics, we admire and respect them.

At eleven lunch is carried in on a little wagon. Some meat, some vegetables, some potatoes, maybe chocolate pudding, or some peanut butter, or orange marmalade. Coffee, too. To us Germans these are delicacies, and we smile at each other, or perhaps shyly at the Americans across the aisle. Then after lunch comes the cigarette man. He carries a round basket, full of all brands of cigarettes. He wakes up the American wounded; and they choose their brand. If he isn't sure, or the patient is new or too quiet to say anything, the man bends down to look for the uniform color under the bed. For the Germans he picks out a leftover brand and tosses it on the blanket with a box of matches. One patient had a pack lying on his blanket from midday till about four; when they checked, they found he had already died in the meantime.

On the third day I am again tapped; a few local novocain shots, then a 10 centimeter needle, 2 millimeters thick, into my right side and with much effort by the doctor, the medic, and myself (holding still) out come cups full of black blood and yellow watery fluid. All of us get 2cc of some heavy injection every six hours, to curtail septic conditions. I am impressed with the emphasis on medical hygiene and how many lives it saves. - But miserable as it all feels, I know our captors are doing everything possible to get us put together again, and although I am too much "under" to articulate what I feel, I begin to have deep feelings of appreciation and respect. I always sensed the American would be human, and they are fully living up to the expectation. And so I grasp the thought "I will survive, and will not go under. I will live! I will live!"

In between coughing, spitting and sleeping, getting turned and being bandaged, receiving injections and pills, I chat with the medics. One, the blond one, works me over pretty hard, wondering why I kept on till the end. Soon I am their translator for all sorts of medical treatments, simple ones only, and signals to and from German patients. Sometimes they wake me to go to work. - With an American next to me I chat about all sorts of weaponry. When one feels in a stupor, it is good to work one's way out of it by such chats, communications, taking interest, because the spirit of life must re-emerge. I do this as soon as I am able, even if only briefly.

To my left lies a young American engineer. He has been shot in the head, and the bullet traveled inside the skull, lacerating everything between skull and brain. One afternoon I lie there, dozing. Suddenly I hear this sudden rustling of blankets, and here sits the engineer, straight up, and from his mouth shoots a stream of jetblack blood. The whole blanket is drenched. A few more spurts; then he sinks back on his pillow with a groan. Somehow, his crisis ends. He pulls through.

Across from me lies a German, a former truck driver. He ran with his ammo truck over a mine and was thrown clear into the air some 30 meters, landing on a roof and then sliding/rolling to the ground. His legs are in hopeless shape; gangrene has set in, and the pain is tearing the man into bits. When the medics or doctors lift the blanket, an unbearable, sickening, sweet-foul stench emerges from the dying stumps.

To my right I have another German, a man from the mountains, from Bavaria. He was hit by a shell in the belly and in the chest. He is pretty clear and by his wits, but when he sleeps he grinds his teeth; they snap, crack, and whine in a strange sort of way; it sounds like small-arms fire way in the distance, or perhaps like roasting chestnuts, the way the old men did it in the old country, before the war, when they stood at the corners in the streets with their roasting pans, selling roast chestnuts to the passers-by for a few Groschen a pound. At night this man keeps me awake; at day we carry on a slurring, sleepy conversation.

Across to the left an American sits almost upright in his bed. His entire head, shoulders, neck, arms and chest are in one solid cast. Only a small hole frees the face. He makes me think of medieval knights in their steely armor; or of fencing students at our universities. He says nothing, does nothing, and smokes an occasional cigarette with one of the medics sitting at the edge of his cot. I pity the man in his waist-up cast, he must itch terribly. Itching, such a peaceful, civilian, harmless type of pain, how ridiculous in the painful world of hospitals a few kilometers behind the front - and yet how terribly it must torture this man, who is to all ends, paralyzed down to his hips.

One day, a few days after my arrival, they carry in a young German, barely seventeen years old. He has a bullet in his chest, and his belly is a mess from a clump of bricks that were hurled at him when a shell blew a nearby house to bits. The medics feed him with thin rubber tubes curving down and into his veins; and they draw his waste from him also with thin rubber tubes. He is in really bad shape. He lies very still, but his face shines and his eyes glisten full of feverish heat. His body is ominously flat against the cot. The American doctor, a nurse captain, does not take her eyes off him. She is a living angel in khaki. She walks to the medical table and turns right around again; she prepares something, all the while checking on him; then she is right back, searchingly looking into his eyes, feeling his head and his pulse, saying a quiet word to an assistant, giving some injection, fixing a bandage, checking a tube. There is an ominous but caring concern

showing in her eyes. The rest of us, battered as we might be, after all, we are now over the worst. But his is different. There is a race going on, a race with the Reaper, doctor against death, and who will win here this time? That is what matters here, and nothing else. The man is brave. Not a sound from him. I translate to him: "They will pump out your stomach...You'll get another injection....This one is just penicillin....." and so forth. But my translating is only another narrow sound in the battle, in this race. Only when he is being bandaged, he screams - and he screams like a man who won't have to scream much longer, who seems to say already "I know this hurts terribly - but I can see the other side of the mountain - I'm almost there now...."

After four more days he enters delirium. His head turns blue, dark red, still more shiny, his eyes almost as bright as coals. He jerks from one side to the other. His tongue is thick and plump, but he tells a story - some story of pain, of woe, of love perhaps, of sadness - we can't make it out. Then the medics bind his wrists against the wooden edge of the cot to prevent the flailing. The hands turn blue, there is a gashing cut where the tape grasps the wrists without relent. His eyes seem to rise from their sockets as if he strains to see something way in the distance. The men around him turn more and more quiet, concentrated, grim. And then, on that fourth day, in the afternoon, the medics put a sheet over him, from head to toe, covering him completely, and all one sees is a clump for the head, and a thin, emaciated stretch for the body. Two litter bearers carry him out of the tent.

THE REAR HOSPITAL

It is late April, 1945. I have now lain ten days in the field hospital and am out of critical condition. The fever and nightmares have lessened, the pain is better, instead of just on the back I now can lie a little bit toward the left side also, from several bandages a day I'm down to two, and I look with gratitude on all the doctors and nurses and medics who, just as before I came and after I will be gone, are carrying on their daily work.

On our last day the Americans get their Purple Heart which they pin on their pajamas, and we get our papers. With ambulances we are being transported into a transfer hospital, all Germans, and I notice how noisy the whole area is, and right away the rations are getting thinner. Soon we find out what the noise is all about: our transfer hospital is next to an airfield and transports are taking off and landing throughout the day and the night.

On the third day, again litter bearers take us up, one by one, and carry us to the airfield where hundreds of us are lying in neat rows, stretcher by stretcher, awaiting what comes next.

With my improving mobility I am looking around a bit, and the man on my right, a small person, is bandaged all around his head, shoulders, chest and both legs. A small fellow, I think, and then it flashes through my brain: I take a good look at his face, framed on all sides by the bandages, and it is the fellow who, just as I got hit, rushed past me laden with his bazooka, and whom I had asked what holes he could find in my uniform. I call to him, slowly he turns around a bit, smiles broadly, and after a few exchanges he tells me his shocking story.

He was hit by German machine gun fire in several places on his body, as his unit had to retreat under ferocious fire. Behind them lay German Waffen SS units who opened fire with machine guns into the German regulars, to stiffen the resistance. It was a grim story of retreating commanders of regular units who were hung one night, and the next night the regulars would take revenge in the same manner. I shuddered. Another symptom of the complete breakdown within the German armed forces. But we both end our conversation smiling, as we think how lucky we are to be in an American military hospital, receiving better medical care than we ever expected or could receive anywhere else.

Soon again the stretcher bearers come and within moments I am stowed away in the uppermost bunk of three, among about forty bunks alongside the walls of the plane, an American C47 cargo plane. Before takeoff I have a few words with some of the flight personnel. The female captain thinks all Germans are Nazis; I tell her it is, mostly, the other way around, but I can understand how she feels. With the radio man I have longer talks, and learn that this ship, going West, transports wounded from the front to the rear hospitals, and going East, transports gasoline in canisters for the advancing mobile units. I think to myself: a smelly job either way.

It is my first time in the air. I notice the revving of the engines, the taxiing, the smooth rolling on the runway, the lift-off and the fortunately smooth flight of about two hours. In late afternoon we land in Nancy, in France, on a big airfield, where many German prisoners are working, and again we are lined up stretcher by stretcher on the ground. It is getting cool. Then into ambulances, and the stretcher bearers carry us several tall stories into an upper room of a large traditional French military barracks built, from bricks, I would think around the turn of the century.

This time we lie in regular hospital beds with white sheets in a white-painted, brightly lit room of about twelve beds. All personnel is German, the rations are visibly smaller and the service is much less attentive than in the field hospital. At one point in the middle of the night, one of my neighbors has a problem, and I call and call until finally after some ten minutes a medic appears.

One day, it happens to be my 18th birthday, the hospital chaplain comes around, and he sits at each bedside and we exchange assuring and comforting words. During my military service, contacts with religious persons or events was extremely rare, and each time it nurtured and impressed me, and in my short time under American care I notice more attention on the spiritual care of the wounded. I receive a small pocket size edition of the New Testament in English, and so I begin to read scripture also in English: somehow I am touched to have this in my hands.

After three days we are being transloaded by the usual procedure into a hospital train of several hundred wounded. It is warm weather, blossoms are out, the landscape is green, and I am fortunate to be near the loading door so I can look out as the green and colorful French landscape rolls by. Our train stops in Le Mans and soon we are assembled in a rear hospital of countless tents, altogether holding about 1,500 wounded prisoners, located in a park with carefully maintained trees, bushes, walkways and lawns. I can only look, but I can appreciate and I can anticipate. It is wonderful to see attractive surroundings after such a long time of the opposite.

I end up in tent 18. My neighbor happens to be from the town next to my own. In the familiar dialect we exchange our stories. He tells me a little later that somehow he had learned I was down to 120 pounds and when he first saw me he was wondering whether I would make it.

Tent 18 holds about thirty wounded in the usual tent layout and of the thirty, twelve are men with abdominal wounds and torn intestines. They have survived the initial traumatic sepsis, they now eliminate via a temporary anus, and look to the day when they will be "reconnected". I wonder: why does it always happen that lunch is brought in just when these men have their bandages changed?

Always searching for somebody or something familiar, soon we find out that our medic is a real prince. He has a wonderful sense of humor, lets absolutely nothing bother him, even when things get loud or painful or smelly, he always has something encouraging and funny to say. He introduces us to a new technique of changing bandages: then, instead of slowly removing the tapes one by one, he says "one, two, and three" and in one mighty pull he removes the entire bandage, and I see him do it with men who have a square foot of bandages on their backs. In short, the brief yell versus the continuing slow moan.

After the first day or two I philosophize how different a rear hospital is from a field hospital. In the field hospital the wounds have just happened. It is the beginning of the recovery train, and not everybody survives. The operation rooms are very busy, the consumption of bandages, blood, etc. is much higher, and many more times a dead patient is carried out, covered from head to foot. There is no difference between Americans and Germans. It is the unfathomable, almost spiritual bond between all fighting men, even on opposite sides. To be sure, there is an underlying good will between Americans and Germans, despite war conditions, certainly in comparison to other nations, and perhaps understandably so.

In the rear hospital, by comparison, things are slower, cleaner, less changeable, and one day follows the one before, and it is easy to lose date or time. Survival rates are much, much higher. Americans are Americans, and Germans are Germans. Here at Le Mans only the administration and the supervisory medical staff is American, all the rest of the staff is German. One of the old disciplinary German ways is still applied even in the hospital: on Saturdays, for the weekly inspection, the tent sergeant lines up the beds by the inch as if each bed was a recruit in line. Rations of course are more limited. All this we take in stride, and the only thing that bothers us a bit, is that we are not permitted, military style, to salute the American officers.

Meanwhile, day after day, I am making progress. The wounds suppurate less and less and I can do with one daily bandaging. My right arm is still without any use, and I begin training myself to write with the left. The arm burns and tingles terribly, but the doctor tells me that is the sign of recovery. Many times a day I do my lung exercise: I sit up a bit and blow with a rubber hose into a gallon jar full of water. Gradually I am doing it better and better. After some time I try fully to sit up but I get so dizzy I must immediately lie down again. Later I swing my legs sideways as if to start walking away, and as I put my feet on the ground the legs just shake uncontrollably. After a few attempts I am sternly ordered back to bed; I had acted without doctor's permission.

It is May 8! Armistice Day! No more shooting, peace is coming! It is a hot day and we swelter in our tent: the open side flaps allow some ventilation. All day and way into the night, we hear almost constant rifle fire: it is the French guards, firing off their ammunition from sheer spirit of celebration.

We all knew of course the war already was effectively at an end, but each of us in his own way celebrates. I have a long meandering of my thoughts, and for a long while tears well up, both from sadness and from rejoicing. Later in the day there is some loud music being played at the central assembly ground, and the sound floats over to us, a treat for our ears.

Oh, here he comes. It is Dr. Krauth, from a small town near mine, and he grins at me but he has a large, long syringe in his hand. I know what it means. I sit up on the bed, and he literally leans into me going again for some more liquid that must come out of the lung and chest cavity. He has to work much harder than before, and I have to lean into him, and the result is less liquid, which is gratifying. I should be dry soon. As he leaves he tells me I have a scar on my lung of a size and thickness he has never seen. I don't know whether that makes me feel good or bad, but I am glad it is over.

After ten weeks, a thorough examination in front of the chief surgeon. A severe man, he threatens major surgery to remove the shell fragments if I am not in a certain shape by a certain time, the details of which I do not understand. Several doctors stand around me, as if I were a circus elephant; there must have been something medical of interest, but I do not understand it.

But, a few days later I am assured that I am O.K., and I am allowed gradually to get up. I learn walking again; it takes two days to be able to stand up; and like many of my neighbors, I walk from bedpost to bedpost and am proud when one day I make it to the latrine and back in good shape and without help or cane. In short, real progress, real recovery. Now I can see more of my comrades around me.

Recovery is the key purpose of the hospital. Every case is different, although sometimes similar by type; but how people respond and handle their recovery is very different and critically important. We have one man who is truly in excellent shape after abdominal wounds, but he complains as if he would die tomorrow. We have several others who truly have severely lacerated abdomens and intestines but who are quietly determined to win and make little noise about it. One man, already on his feet, stumbles laughingly into our tent "Guess what guys, I'm going to make it! I'm going to live! I got a hard on during bandaging so now I know I am going to make it!"

I take more and more interest in patients walking around, slowly, like guests in a spa or sanatorium. Each of us has a robe, mine is dark blue, others are maroon, all of them with the letters "USMC", meaning United States Medical Corps. We Germans think this is unbelievable luxury, and we enjoy it. The weather is wonderful, cool mornings and warm days, and our spirits visibly perk up as we slowly learn walking around and partaking of life again.

But recovery is fast for some and slow for others. I had always wondered why I so often heard a low continuous moaning from a bed further down in my tent. It is a man, a severe burn victim, in recovery, but it will take time. Both his legs are in traction, and large areas of his thighs and calves are open flesh. I see something wiggle on the glistening shining surface: white and in large numbers. Maggots! Maggots to keep the gangrene under control. The poor guy is going crazy from the itching. In between moans, he smiles a little when we talk with him.

Another man, lying flat on his back, smiles up at me, and I look at his skull where little by little hair is coming back. In the middle is an opening about the size of a large coin and I see his pulse beat, as the open brain with skin over it resembles a child's fontanelle.

And then there is the syphilis victim, already so far gone that the surgeon clamps the bandage shears into the man's side, and he does not even register with his eyes or by sound or in any way. I am shocked. What ravages in war!

I see much downright heroism. The quiet courage of the really difficult cases working their way back up to life. The attractive, suntanned German nurse, making the rounds daily, with her large brown eyes searchingly looking over each case, and then doing whatever bandaging she has to do. The worst case is an amputee with large-scale suppurations and the smell is lethal, but she handles him with a caring professionalism I only can admire. I have of course much time to reflect.

All my belongings fit into a tiny sack which I made myself out of bandages. It contains my most valuable piece: an ink pencil about two inches long. I rejoice to be free of pain now, breathing much, much better, walking slowly but ably, conversing with comrades, enjoying some of the surroundings, looking toward the future. I have looked to the future, the end of hostilities, for so long. And here it is reality. But what will happen with us individually? Will we be discharged into prison camps, about which we had heard horrible things? Will we be sent home? What will we find there? What will have happened to my buddies? And when will our life resume: living, schooling, graduating, all the things we long to see ahead of us?

THE HOMECOMING

It is late in June 1945. I have now been an ambulatory patient for a few days and I enjoy the freedom, chatting with my comrades, looking here and observing there how the Americans run rear hospitals, just letting time slip by and recovering.

Today, Saturday evening, something out of the ordinary is happening: unannounced, the doctor in charge of our tent is making the rounds again, and he seems to be making notations of certain patients, some fifteen out of the fifty-six that are in our large tent. Ours is a tent for serious cases for whom nothing more can be done, and I wonder what he is up to. When he leaves, the rumor makes the rounds that we fifteen are being selected for transport home. We have heard rumors hundreds of times in our military life, and often with disappointments following. Nevertheless, our mood is suddenly bright and hopeful. Why would it not be true? Will it be true?

The next day, Sunday, I go to church service in the hospital chapel. On the way, with hope in my heart, I start a song but after three stanzas I stop, the air just isn't enough. The service and the sermon touch me deeply. Oh, hope! Oh, faith! We need them as much as we need bread and water.

After the service back in the tent, the usual daily rounds by the doctor. "Not good today, captain" I say; he replies "What shall I do with you? I have the idea to send you back home, rated unfit for service, provided you will not stay in any camp for any length. Let's see!"

That evening, with the cruelty of the military rumor mill, word passes around that the transport is postponed for four to six weeks. But: the next morning as I walk around I see a large number of ambulances in the central parking lot, and I wonder about their purpose. Barely am I back in the tent and already my buddies call to me "Schumacher, get ready, you are part of the transport". And within minutes the top medical sergeant hands me my x-rays and papers, I receive an ex-GI outfit of underwear, zippered jacket and trousers, the two latter items with huge white letters "PW" on front and back. The jacket bears three neatly repaired bullet holes; - the former owner of this jacket probably is dead, a somber note in the midst of my rejoicing.

While I dress myself, my comrades hand me slips of paper with their home addresses and telephone numbers and short messages. The doctor also hands me the address of his wife. Quickly I gather up my little sack of belongings, and after a short ride in the ambulances we are at the train terminal. "Hospital Train 121" it says on the wagons, and with it we will leave after weeks the 166th US Army Evacuation Hospital, Le Mans, France, in the care of the train crew and a contingent of guards (both for protection and custody).

On July 15 an open truck column is being assembled, and we stand for an hour in open trucks as we are being transported to a prisoner discharge camp. I almost had forgotten pain, but with the constant vibration the ride was a cruel reminder of the pains of weeks gone by. But so what, I say, we are heading for home! We arrive in a huge warehouse complex of many hundreds of prisoners, and Monday morning, day after tomorrow, our final discharge examinations are to begin.

8:00 the examination starts. Our papers are being examined and re-examined. I stand in front of an examiner, with my hands held high, in the attitude of prisoners of all nationalities, and he asks me questions perhaps seeking to trick me about my identity, service record and other details. It turns out before the war he was a student in my hometown and we exchange a few friendly remarks. He tells me all the bridges in my hometown have been detonated by the Germans but the city itself is unharmed. Then he asks me some more questions about details of my hometown, restaurants, streets and other specifics, gives me another long look and whacks an "I" on my papers, which means Immediate Discharge. I go out by the door to the right of the examiner's table, the door to freedom. As I look back, a prisoner, formerly of the Waffen-SS, with a dejected look leaves via the left door: who knows how long his imprisonment will last.

In the afternoon the examination continues. Again papers are examined, my name is checked through a very thick directory of war criminals, but when the examiner sees my age he grins, shakes his head and stamps me O.K. A final medical examination, 40 marks discharge money, and a black round stamp is pressed on my cap, my jacket, and my pants, which signifies to all and everybody that this man is examined and ready for discharge. The next morning we are to be transported home by bus.

I could scream with joy, but there are too many other still troubled faces about, prisoners that will not be discharged because of their service or political record, and again I am reminded how very fortunate I have been all through these war years. I am so happy I could embrace the entire world. Excitedly we dischargees talk with each other about our expectations, experiences and hopes. Late in the evening comes the formal assignment to the home transports: "Schumacher, line 1, truck 546!"

That night I hardly shut an eye. Many, many things go through my mind with racing speed. I am too excited to handle any thought with care or thoroughness, everything moves so quickly through my mind.

Finally it is morning. At 8:00 in the morning we are loaded into a decommissioned German army communications truck with benches; the instrument cabin is still in place. It is a fast ride through town after town, and as we get closer to my destination the dear names become more and more familiar.

Only after the war did I learn that our Lutheran pastor (See "The Pastor") was a member of the Confessing Church, the branch of the Evangelical Church in Germany to which also Dietrich Bonhoeffer belonged, who was martyred, which uncompromisingly stuck to the Gospel and uncompromisingly rejected the corruption from Nazi doctrine. Apparently the only reasons this Pastor could continue to preach were the stringent wartime conditions, the loyalty of the congregation, and the town's high agricultural production needed for the war effort. I still have his confirmation certificate. It hangs, framed, in my room, somewhat yellowed, and what meaning and what memories it incorporates.

In 1952, in the office at my first job in Boston, at the end of the day, I had a conversation with my desk neighbor about slide rules and sextants and other navigational tools. He said he had been a regular user of sextants during the war; I then followed through with questions and discovered that he had been a fighter pilot over the territory where we were in the anti-aircraft service, and that he had been shot down on May 6, 1944 late in the morning, had caught fire, was the only fighter in the whole sky that morning, and had flown west of the Rhine and bailed out. (See "The Duel"). He knew that the Rhine, for him as an Allied pilot would be impossible to cross, either by swimming due to the current, or due to the extremely tight police control at the bridges. After he had bailed out, and some farmers already were converging on his landing spot, he managed to hide his chute, stay in hiding for the day, and then took up marching during darkness toward the French border. Then he lived on his iron rations, unripe apples and other fruit, and just plain hungered. After two weeks he reached the French border and was immediately picked up by the FFI (French Forces of the Interior), who managed a wartime pilot retrieval system at the French border which contributed solidly to the recovery of allied pilots who either were shot down, forced to land, or bailed out. The undercover pilot transport system, run by partisans and FFI members, reunited him with the American forces soon after the allied invasion in Normandy. Who would have thought that the lonely American fighter we all observed in our battery position would be the one I would meet eight years later at the end of the day in an ordinary office!

After my return to my hometown in July 1945, I sat down and wrote the priest and his housekeeper a long letter. (See "The Priest"). I thanked him for what they both had done for me and said that I had recovered and was free in my hometown. I never heard from him again, and later learned that he had been moved, I do not know where. - - Then, thirteen years later, in 1958, during my first return visit to Germany after my 1947 immigration to the United States, my wife and I visited the little parsonage. A new, younger, dark-looking priest had taken over. We spent a half an hour in the dusk of his study, and he told me how very fortunate I was, - - had I been found where he was at the end of the war, in the Balkans, the local population would have quartered me with horses. I shuddered, I thanked him and made my departure, and it took me a good while to pull myself together after this conversation. I had forgotten how terrible it all was in many places, and how very blessed and fortunate I had been.

No German family was spared the ravages of war.

My foster mother's older sister in Berlin, besides years and years of intensive air raids, lived through ten days and nights in the cellar of their apartment building as the Russian infantry fought from street to street, house to house, floor to floor and room to room, before the final capitulation.

My foster sister's first husband lost his life in the icy wastes of Russia as a young officer in the infantry.

One of my three closest friends, Gerhard, the youngest of three sons of a Danish-German family, while in the infantry in Russia, was sent on a night patrol on the very first day in the line, - a severe misjudgment by his commanding officer, considering the patrol experience necessary for survival. In the early morning dawn, contact with the enemy was made, a firefight ensued, and when the patrol had to retreat, his body was seen lying still, face down on the ground. Shortly afterwards the patrol counter-attacked and looked for his body but it was no longer on its spot. Did he become a Russian prisoner? Was he killed in action and removed? He was never heard from again. - - His older bother, Werner, my former mathematics mentor, also in the infantry in the west, was "down to his toothbrush" three different times during the Allied invasion. - - The oldest brother of the three, Erich, served in the Afrika Korps and was hit by a shell fragment the size of a human hand which could not or in any case was not removed for ten full days in the heat of that region, after which gangrene set in and he died in a hospital in Rome, with his mother at his bedside.

My Father was "bombed out" - that is, he lost many of his belongings, - three separate times in the air attacks.

His sister, my aunt, was married to a farmer in Pomerania, and I remember three long, wonderful summer vacations there where I as a city boy was introduced to the rigors but also the charms of life in the country on a large working farm. They and their neighbors were hard, proud, frontier-type people. In the Spring of 1945 the Russians advanced. My uncle, the leader, formed a wagon train together with eighteen neighbors and moved westward. Naturally their movement was slow, and soon they were overtaken by fast-moving Russian tanks. For this almost certain eventuality, my uncle, my aunt and their neighbors on the wagon train had formed a suicide pact. Being overtaken, they knew what would happen to the women, indeed if anybody would come out alive. In accordance with the pact, all eighteen lay face down in the grass, side by side, and it fell to my uncle to shoot them all including his wife in the neck before he, at the end, fired the gun against his temple.

My mother had left Germany before the war as the bride of her to-be second husband, a Jewish surgeon with an established practice in Munich. The circumstances under which they fled Germany, through various intermittent countries, and finally to the USA, could fill a small book. I regret that, while my mother spoke of these times on several occasions particularly early

after the war, I never really made the effort to note these comments in any systematic manner. This doctor's first wife, his brother and his mother all perished in the Nazi concentration camps. He later, after the war, sponsored my immigration to the United States which can well be called the largest good fortune any German at that time could ever expect to be offered.

But I must wind down, I must come to an end of this story.

Now that it is almost fifty years later, what feelings, what meanings, what "lessons" remain about the whole experience?

1. From pride to shame. As young fifteen- and sixteen-year olds we had felt a certain pride and excitement to be a part of our home country's anti-aircraft defense, aware that cities all around us were falling into ashes. In a short time this enthusiasm shrunk down to a never-ending physical fatigue, a darkening awareness of the eventual outcome, a rising disgust and disappointment at the growing corruption, and eventually, bottomless revulsion and shame when, upon returning home, we learned of the full scale of Nazi atrocities. Not the passage of time, no attempt at ameliorating argument, no retribution past or future, will wipe off my shared feeling of collective shame over my homeland's misdeeds against Jews, political enemies, and Eastern European peoples.

   In short, taken altogether it was a downhill trip. To be part of a losing war, taxes one's soul. To lose without honor, really does so.

2. Discipline. We learned to lose our own selves in our group, yet, we learned also to retain within ourselves a tiny flame of selfhood, self-reliance, self-respect. We learned to forget altogether about comfort, pleasures, safety, - and yet we learned to winnow these out of the tiniest bits of favorable circumstances such as a short rest, extra rations, a bullet proof foxhole, surprise leave, some other stroke of good fortune. Altogether, we learned to shut up, to take orders, to do the needed thing despite danger, fatigue, uncertainty, whatever.

   "Many are the non-military uses of military training". Perhaps they are the after-effect, the bonus of these experiences. We did not philosophize then, we simply did. We later learned something very valuable: that a disciplined life really is easier than one not disciplined.

3. Comradeship

   We learned that nothing in life counts for more than firm, supportive relationships. In the military, relationships means comradeship, and this includes its light-hearted cousin, camaraderie. You run out of ammunition, you lose some gear, you mess up, - and it is your comrade who comes to your aid. - In a wider sense, this includes all ranks and

levels. Somewhere I read, and I agree, that the real reason for what is often called bravery, is not seeking glory, is not patriotism, but very simply comradeship, team spirit, "unit coherence" as the Pentagon generals call it. It is the military counterpart of what the Apostle Paul speaks of in Romans 12 and First Corinthians Chapter 12. One of my most memorable experiences of which I speak here, was Christmas Eve 1943, an evening centered around a single candle and a shared bottle of wine among a few like-minded, warm-hearted comrades.

4. Respect

This is a very strong and deep feeling. I will always retain respect for soldiers, non-coms as well as officers of which I have seen many, under stress, act coolly, maturely, selflessly, and for the benefit of all. All for one and one for all, indeed.

I have in my heart deep respect and gratitude for the nurses, medics, doctors and chaplains, and the Catholic priest and his housekeeper, all of whom saved my life and helped me to get well.

I equally have respect for what was then "the enemy": for the American or British bomber crews who had to sweat their way through the hellish flak fire we laid on them, and in an all-encompassing sense, respect alike for British Tommys, French Poilus, Russian Ivans, American GI's, as well as German Landsers.

A special gratitude I feel for the small group of displaced persons, former Polish prisoners working with the local German farmers, who as I lay in the parsonage, walked up to the American commanders and requested that the little village be spared. They had been treated well by their "employers". I had one such former Polish prisoner tell me under tears how he felt about his treatment, and I have never forgotten it.

5. Humanity

It may sound odd to speak of humanity in connection with military life. Sure, the "front side" of the military has little of the humane in it, and much of the opposite. But on the inside and on the back side, if you are receptive, you can find it. All through these years while danger never was far away, I never lost the feeling that, in the end, we were all human beings, we within our units as well as "the enemy". I sensed then, and I know now, that hard drill is the best path for survival in action. Duty was shared, and many of our officers did first what they required from us. Our "rules of engagement" included many human considerations toward friend or foe alike. As the end came near, I never doubted the fundamental humaneness of the American fighting force, and I was not disappointed. But I am saddened deeply about how many millions of soldiers, civilians, prisoners for whatever reason, did not or could not lean on this transcendental feeling of humaneness.

6. Spirituality

Finally, my soul has been nurtured, during the very worst months, through quiet talks with my deeply believing Catholic friend, Peter, and his friend, a Catholic seminarian. My soul has been refreshed, even if only briefly, when marching during the night we passed crucifixes by the roadside. I was nourished and calmed, when lying on my cot or bunk or in a tent or foxhole, I dipped into my pocket Bible which went with me everywhere to the very end. I felt cheered when I recited from memory the psalms, Lutheran hymns, and Bible verses which our pastor taught us during the last year of "peace" before our service time. I have felt the caring, open attitude of American hospital chaplains as they made their rounds, sharing encouragement and reading material. I have been uplifted during the few church services while on home leave, in the field and in the hospital.

And if there is any perspective which has helped and will yet continue to help me, even in the smallest way, to digest the total mass of what happened during World War II, - - - it is what is wrapped up inside this spiritual dimension.

Will warmaking ever end? Yes, - when it ends in the hearts and minds of men, in the halls of governments, in the executive suites of armament makers and wherever else warmaking is prepared; yes, - - when armies no longer invade neighboring (or distant) countries, when refugees no longer are driven from home and land into misery, when bullets and shells and bombs and mines and rockets no longer shatter lives, limbs and possessions.

Because if warmaking, the making of war, ends, then also, finally, the weapons of defense, of war-stopping, can be withdrawn, and truly then "they shall beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks." But, I guess, not until then.